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A HAZARDOUS WOOING

JAMES BLYTH

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"At the opening of my lips, Soft Fred entered the cave."
(Page 44.)

[Frontispiece

A Hazardous Wooing]

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A HAZARDOUS WOOING.

BY

JAMES BLYTH.

AUTHOR OF "THE AERIAL BURGLARS," "JUICY JOE," "CELIBATE SARAH," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED.

LONDON:
WARD, LOCK & CO., LIMITED.
1907.

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A HAZARDOUS WOOING.

CHAPTER I.

THE HIGHWAYMAN AND THE GIRL.

THE night was the last of many of its like for me. I'd chanced my luck with the bones often enough before, and ridden home sometimes the richer and sometimes the poorer for the fall of the spots. But that Saturday, the 14th day of December, 1803, had brought ruin to me.

As soon as we had sold our beasts and wheat and barley, a dozen of us sat down to play at the "Old Star" at Yarmouth—a dozen jolly farmers, with our pockets full of money, for the nearness of Christmas had sent up the prices, and all the country round had come in to sell what there were

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plenty to buy. But by ten of the clock there were but four of us left to the dice and the punch bowl. The rest had far to go, across the dam over the marshes, and were none of them so drunk but they had the prudence to rise betimes to encounter the hazard of the risen waters.

Those who remained were Sir Hubert de Burgh, the squire of Burgh Castle, Tom Grimmer of Bradwell, Robert Annison of Belton, and myself—Will Buddery. I was twenty-five years all told at the time. My mother had been dead five years and my father four, and I was their only child, so that the farmhouse and a hundred and twenty acres at Fritton, on the borders of the Mere, had fallen to me alone. And a nice use I seemed to have made of them! Tom and Robert had lost, indeed, but not as I had, for the whole of my takings in the cattle market and the corn exchange, being some five hundred pounds, had gone into Sir Hubert's pockets, and be d——d to him. Thank God I had no wife or child to consider. There was only old mother Durrant, my housekeeper, to chide when I got home,

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and she dared not go too far—sour-tempered old vixen though she was. Still it is bitter enough to be ruined one's self; and when the last of my companions turned off at Belton four cross ways and left me to ride the remaining mile and a half by myself, my heart sank at the hopelessness of the future. Not a farthing was in my pouch, and I had sold every fat bullock in the yard, and nearly every grain of corn in granary or stack—and lost the money. It would be all I could do to get trusted for seed, for ill tidings spread apace, and I knew Sir Hubert was no friend of mine to hold his tongue concerning what he had taken from me.

The night was dark and blustering, and after Bob Annison cried a hoarse good-night (for he was far gone in liquor) I had no heart to make speed along the rough road. My good horse (and it was mere luck I had not put him on the table and lost him too) felt how it was with me, and whinnied as he picked his way in the ruts and stones. The wind blustered in the gorse and ling of the great common on my

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right, and the curlew whistled and cried down on the marshes like souls in torment. There was no moon, and the stars could not pierce the wrack of cloud. The drink I had taken dulled me, but I was sober enough. I remembered that a few yards on was Burn-the-bush Hill, where everyone knows the ghost of Sam Reed, the footpad, is to be seen. He was hanged in chains on the rise of the hill, and any moonlight night heard the clank of the chains and saw his hideous spectre in road or common. My horse pecked and stumbled, and I came to myself with a curse as I snatched up his head. "Well," says I, "if he's here to-night I'm hanged if I can see him, for it's as dark as pitch, and what the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve at, so hut up old hoss."

Faithful pricked up his ears and was about to break into a trot, when out from the shadow of the plantation on the left a dark mass came right athwart of me, and before I could pull or spur there was a pistol at my head and a hand on my horse's bridle. I could have laughed at the man.

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Why? Not a rider on the road but was richer than I that night!

I could only just see the pistol and the hand that held it, and, behind these, a black mask that made the night blacker. The horse the highwayman rode was a good seventeen hands, and the rider tall to fit him.

"Your money or your life, my friend," says he, and, begad, I burst out laughing. Maybe this took him aback, for he waited a second or two, and then says he again, "Your money or your life. Hand over, and be d——d to you."

With that I fell mad. What was my life to me then? Begad, I'd have a run for my money, if it was play or pay. I dropped the reins, and dashed the pistol aside with my left hand, while at the same moment I drove with my right fist full below the edge of the mask, where I guessed the point of the chin would be. Tom of Hopton had not taught me to hit straight from the shoulder for nothing. I put as much of my fourteen stone as I could raise from the saddle into the blow, and, Ecod! the man

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dropped like a shot rabbit. The pistol went off in the air somewhere, and made the rascal's nag rear and bolt, but old Faithful knew too much of shooting from the saddle to start. Many a time had I taken him down to marsh after duck at evening flight, and he stood as still as the highwayman lay on the road.

It was all over in the wag of a duck's tail. "Hold there, old hoss," says I, as I slipt from the saddle to have a look at my man; for, thought I, who knows if I am the first he has stopped to-night, and what luck he may have had with others; and if he has any ill-gotten gains upon him I am as much entitled to them as he!

Just for luck I heaved him up, and I knew by his dead weight that he was settled for some little time, if not for good. I took him to the grassy edge of the common land, and stretched him out again, after a quiet punch behind the ear to keep him asleep. Then I stooped and searched his pockets.

He wore a coat with great spreading tails, and with wide and deep pockets both

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outside and in; and he must have been at the game some hours, for he was full of brass. From the outside pockets I took three bags of money (I could not examine them till I got them home, but I felt their weight and marvelled and rejoiced!) and out of the inside I took five more, besides four great watches and seals, and a case containing notes. Now these last I had no use for. I had no will to know who had been stopped before my turn came, and it seemed likely that if I were to look at the watches too closely I might know whence they came. And as for the notes, their numbers might at any time bring about the betrayal of their holder. I felt that the money was mine. I had won it fairly. But if one of the watches belonged to an overmarsh farmer (and it was any odds but they all did, as well as the notes) it would be hard to deny that some of the hard cash did the same. So I slipped the watches and case back again, raised the man a little higher and out of the way of travellers, and, placing the bags of money in my pockets, I was about to mount saddle

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again when I heard a shrill cry from over the common.

Faithful pricked his ears, and I waited, one foot in stirrup and one on ground.

"What a fool am I," I thought. "It's only the curlew!"

I put my weight on the stirrup and began to swing up. But before I got my leg across the horse the cry was repeated, and this time it was nearer, and I knew it for the cry of a woman.

"Help," rang the cry.

I steadied myself down again, and said to old Faithful, "Now, what the devil does this mean, old hoss?"

For I was just by the bend of the road where Sam Reed rattled his bones, and ghosts can cry as well as show themselves. I never had much fear man to man, but I own I liked to encounter flesh and blood, and this thing seemed more unearthly than anything of good Norfolk or Suffolk soil. Old Faithful gave a great shiver and chinked his bit and bridle and rattled his trappings. That all but settled me, for I knew a horse always shivers when there are

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ghosts nigh, or when Shuck* is on the road.

"I reckon we'd best ride for it," says I to Faithful. "I've got the brass right enough, and I don't want the devil to have me."

Then I took cheer, for along the path through the gorse, which runs down to marsh, I heard the beat of quick feet, and a sobbing breathing.

"Oh, who are you?" came the woman's voice from out of the dark. "Who are you?"

Now that was what I heard a lawyer at Norwich Assizes once call a leading question. Never before had I wished to deny myself, especially to a woman with so sweet a voice as that which came upon the night wind. But there I was, who but a short time before had been ruined, and who now seemed like to be set right again through the chance of my good friend the highwayman, but with no desire to be seen with the bags of gold about me, and the senseless man under the cover of the gorse. But if

* The Phantom Dog of Norfolk.

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I fled I should never be able to hold my head up again. Was I, Will Buddery, the tallest and broadest man, the strongest, and the hardest hitter for five miles round, to run from an unknown wench in the night? "No! hang it, Will," says I to myself, "we'll see who she is, at all events. 'Tis not like you to be afeared of a woman, and a young one, too, by the way she runs!"

"Hoi!" I yelled. "Here I be!"

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CHAPTER II.

JUDITH MALLARD.

As soon as I shouted the footsteps ceased to patter. They were by now close upon me, and it came to my mind that whoever the wench was she did not wish to be seen before she learnt who it was that awaited her. In this notion I was confirmed by her next cry.

"I hear you," she cried. "But I know not your voice. Who are you?"

I have no skill to write down the words as she spoke them. We North folk and South folk have a way of speech which differs very greatly from the manner of the spelling which I have found in Master Fielding's and Master Smollett's ingenious stories. I know not what country gave birth to Squire Western, but it was not the Eastern counties,

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and I can only ask such of my readers as know the Norfolk tongue to imagine it as they peruse the words of the marsh folk whom I shall have to tell of in this history. Even I myself, a freeholder, and one time scholar of the grammar school at Yarmouth, have a manner of speech very unlike that which I have heard learned counsel and judges use at the Assizes. Their words seem to me to be more near their spelling. But, as I have said, I have no skill to write other than as I have taught myself in dictionaries and story books, and I have the prudence not to attempt that which is beyond me.

But this is to delay my story, for which I ask pardon, as nothing irks me more than when a writer diverges from the interest of his narrative to indulge in selfish ramblings, whether of excuse or in order to preach a sermon.

"Why, bless your heart," cried I, "I'm Will Buddery, at your service."

"Thank God!" I heard her cry, and the little patter, patter came swiftly nearer. Presently along the worn path, through

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the high gorse and broom, a female figure burst upon me, and as it did so the cloud wrack parted and let the glow of the stars shine down upon us.

It was a girl that I saw, scarce come to womanhood, early as the marsh air brings ripeness. She was tall for her sex, and lissome as an otter. Her thick, long hair hung loose down her back, and in the treacherous light seemed black. But I will anticipate and say here that I found it afterwards to be a rich red brown, like the colour of ripe red wheat with the sun upon it. Her face was the shape of a perfect egg, her eyes were large and (as I knew afterwards) of a divine hazel. She carried herself with the dainty confidence of a thoroughbred, and the pretty playfulness of a thoroughbred's pace was like her walk and like her run. What she wore I could not tell for my life, except that her upper part was clad in a fisherman's worsted close-fitting overall. Her sleeves were turned up and showed her wrists, brown with the sun and wind, and wiry with steel sinews. I had seen the girl about, but neither had I spoken

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to her ever, nor, indeed, did I know how she was named. She wore no head covering.

"And was it you who fired?" she asked.

"To tell ye truth, my dear," says I, "'twas not. The rascal who took a pot shot at me has gone his ways."

"Ah!" she cried. "I heard his horse's gallop."

I thought to myself that that might very well be. But I would venture to wager that he was not on his horse. I began to wonder how long he would remain unsensed. I heard nothing from where I had placed him. If he were dead, well, his death would sit lightly on my conscience. But if he were found dead, those whom he had robbed might wonder what had happed to the money of which he had relieved them. All this passed through my mind like a flash. But it was no time to be nice in deliberation. This girl wanted me, 'twas clear, and I could do nothing while she was with me.

"And," said I, "you thanked God 'twas me!"

"I did," said she. "You are true marsh blood; and they say your father was no

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enemy to a night landing or a bit of boating by night, with a cargo in the well."

"He was not," said I. "And you may take my word for it. For that matter, I've rowed over Breydon with muffled oars myself before now."

"Then come with me," says she. "You are the man I want. Come, if you be a man, for a woman and an old man need you."

Now the girl's courage and trust pleased me, and I was never one to hold back from an adventure. For that matter, adventure or no adventure, there was that in her voice, that in her eyes, which would have made me to leap over the brink of hell pit at her orders. Many women had I met, and many had I courted after the fashion of my blood and folk, but never had my soul answered to a woman's call as it did then. What is it that passes instantly between the one woman and the one man which binds them for good or ill for ever? For bound I was, as by steel bonds, and the gall of them was to let me no little blood ere we were done with them.

"I'll come," says I. "But first tell me

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who you are. I've given you that pledge of my honour."

I thought she hesitated before she spoke again, and, when she did speak, poor girl, I could guess at the reason of her momentary backwardness,

"I'm Judith Mallard," she said.

"What?" I cried, "Judith Mallard, the——" and I stayed my words, for I had no will to hurt her.

"Ay!" she cried, and scorn rang in her voice and bit into my senses like fire; "Judith Mallard, the wizard's granddaughter. Have you fear to follow me now?"

"Nay," I answered, "I meant not to affront you. The foolish words of the country-side were but on my tongue. I give no thought to them."

"Come then, and quickly," she cried. "Every minute increases our danger."

"But my horse?" I cried.

"Your horse?" she answered. "I knew not you were a horse-back." For good old Faithful had stayed so still, and she had used her eyes so closely to read my face

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that she had not noticed where the old friend stood.

I whistled to him, and he came up to where we stood on the edge of the common, and against the opening to the bridle path through the covert.

"He'll serve us," she cried. "Have no fear for him. We treat those well who aid us."

"But you?" I asked. "Will you ride before me, and let me hold you safe aback of him?"

"Mount you," she answered. "You shall not ride alone. Nay, mount." And she stamped her little foot as I hesitated in wonder at what she had it in her mind to do.

I leapt astride, and, as soon as I was settled in my seat, I saw Judith take a little run, place her hand on Faithful's crupper, and up she rose, turning in the air to seat herself behind me.

"Hold on by my waist," I said.

"Ride you; ride you," cried she. "Look to your going, for the light is dim and the path uneven. Look you to your horse's going, and have no care for me. Strange would it be could I not balance on a broad back like this good nag's."

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So I put his head to the common and whispered him to make good speed, and he whinnied and broke into a long swinging gallop, picking his way along the winding path with never a baulk at the eerie shadows of the gorse, or at the rustle of rabbit or hare. The sky had cleared, and now the waning moon was on her back, low on the edge of the Mere Woods behind us. The wind sank, and the night bit more chill. Down on the marshes I heard some geese honking, and old Faithful heard them too, and, I knew, tried to gallop softly, for he checked his speed.

"Go on, old hoss," I whispered to him. "That's not our game to-night."

And he went on, with his loping stride, pecking now and again at a rabbit hole, but never losing his going. And I grew so as to like his pecks, for at each of them I felt Judith thrown against me, and the touch of her body was pleasant to me, and warmed me more than wine.

She swung to and fro with perfect balance, for never was I called upon to stay her. Only when the good horse dropped an inch

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or two in his going she could not keep her perpendicular, and, willy nilly, came against me.

I wondered she did not speak and inform me of what was toward. I could only venture a guess that something was wanted at the Bell Mound House, where the old wizard had dwelt as long back as any man in the parish could remember. But presently Judith whispered over my shoulder (and she rested her hand upon me as she did so). "Can you see a light on the Mound?" she asked.

I looked up from the track, on which I had kept my eyes pretty firmly fixed, and saw that we were close upon the round hill by the marsh, which goes by the name of the Bell Mound. There was enough moon at this hour to see the clump of ash and oak on the mound, but there was no show of any light there.

"No," said I. "There's the Mound, and the trees upon it, but never a shine of light."

"Thank God!" said Judith. "Then Soft Fred has taken it down."

"Soft Fred?" I asked. "Why, what has he to do with you?"

For all the country knew Soft Fred. He

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was one of those queer fellows who have less sense than their neighbours when it comes to work or the common duties of life; but who are shrewd enough in their own interests, and who have remarkable talents and powers over birds, beasts, and fishes, with strange abilities in prophecy of weather, and incredible endurance in passing the soft fens and marsh bogs, and who know every inch of the rivers and meres by dark or light. Fred was privileged in any company. No man paid any regard to him. He would sit in the ingle nook of an inn kitchen and jabber over his liquor, while the folk would talk before him heedless of his presence, ay, would speak their innermost secrecies while he mowed and mouthed within a yard's distance of their tongues. An ungainly man, of great height (for he must have stood six feet and a half upright), with narrow, sloping shoulders, and a lean, meagre figure. His face was thin and sharp, and his long legs so bony and shapeless that when he stood leaning on his leaping pole beside a fifteen foot dyke, his shoulders and the upper part

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of his body bowed, he looked for all the world more like a heron than a man; and, indeed, when he was not named "Soft Fred," he was called "Fred the harnsa." He and I were old friends; and many's the meal he had eaten from my kitchen; many the night he had slept in the hay-loft. He loved me well, for I never jibed him, and he would show me all the best spots to wait for the fowl in flight, or to try for a great pike or eel. He was not "soft" as a sportsman, and, like many of his kind, his simplicity was, to my mind, more assumed than real. He got his living on the marshes, and, he used to say, with a silly laugh, he earned his victual and drink in more ways than one.

"You shall know all presently," said Judith. "See. We are now arrived."

I pulled up old Faithful, and the girl slid to the ground. The path ran round the Mound to the left, on to the marsh, but I knew that way, and that it led to nothing but the river. I looked down and round, and then I sprang from the saddle and looked behind, and even under the horse. For Judith was nowhere to be seen.

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CHAPTER III.

THE WIZARD'S RETREAT.

'D—— the jade," says I to myself, when I found that she had deserted me. "She's brought me on a fool's errand."

I was stamping round old Faithful in a rare temper, for no man loves to be mocked, when I heard a light laugh from behind a clump of bushes on the right.

"Nay, Will," said Judith's voice; "but I wondered if the way was known to you."

Even as she spoke the clump of bushes opened out, and I saw that they were fixed in some manner so as to turn like a gate. A narrow way led round the Mound, and now, in the moonlight, I saw a thin curl of smoke rising over the hill.

"Bring in your horse," said Judith, but a thought came to me, and I said—

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"Will you want him again to-night?"

"Nay," said she; "but you cannot leave him to roam by himself."

"Bless your heart," says I, "he knows his way home like a Christian; and his manger's full. But wait till I unbit him. He has deserved the feed he will find when he gets home."

With that I unbridled good Faithful, and patting him on the neck, I said to him, "Home, old boy. Home. Wait for your master."

I turned his head up the bridle path down which we had ridden, and smacked him on the quarters. "Home, old boy," said I again. And off he set, with a shake of the head and a neigh, as if to tell me he understood my orders well enough.

"Come quickly," said Judith. "There is much to do, and as yet I know not how it is to be done. That must be your portion to contrive a way. But follow me apace."

She swung the bushes into place and ran before me round the Mound, and there, under the very shoulder of the hill, was a thatched cottage with outbuildings, all built

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of clay and wattle. A light shone from a window on the side of the Mound, but without, and facing the river (which could now be seen swollen and in full flood) all was dark.

Judith made her way to the little low door and tapped gently seven times. At the seventh rap the door was opened, and I saw Soft Fred, stooping his height in the low passage which led to the door.

"What! Master Will?" cried Fred. "Indeed, Miss Judy, you've had luck. You could not have springed a better bird for the work, and you may take it from poor Fred."

By this time I was getting impatient to know what the work was. And I said so.

"Wait but one minute longer," begged Judith, placing her hand upon my arm with a gentle pressure which sent my blood galloping faster than did ever the fellow I had felled in the road.

"Is grandfather any worse?"

"He's about the same," said Fred. "He sit and shake terrible. Shake! Ah! He

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do shake. Like an old Johnny spider in his web when he see a bird a coming arter him."

"Come and see my grandfather," said Judith. "And if he consent I will tell you all."

I should dearly have liked to have avoided it. Ever since I could remember I had heard stories of the great wizard of the marsh, who could raise thunder and lightning and call down blessings and curses as easily as other men call for their dinners. But already I was riveted to Judith, and I bore in mind her look of scorn when I had nearly called him wizard.

The room she led me into was larger than I had thought possible in a dwelling which wore so poor an outward pretence. It was full twenty-five foot by twenty, and was tall enough for Fred to stand upright in, which many of our village cottages and farmhouses were not. A great fire of marsh peat and wreck wood glowed and blazed in the wide chimney; and in the ingle nook, heaped up in wrappings of sheep's and bullock's pelts, was a shuddering,

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shrunken old image. But for the shivers, which shook all his heavy wraps, he might have been a corpse, by the look of his face as first I saw it. But when he turned upon our entrance, and his eyes fell on me, there was such a glow of life and wit as never did I see in another. He did not rise from his seat, but as he turned the outermost wrap fell from his shoulders, and showed that they had been shoulders of a mighty man in his time. His head was broad, and fleshless, his skull bones showing clear and plain. His hair was scanty and quite white, and his face and chin were covered with long straggling whiskers. His teeth were still strong in his head, but his lips were withered so that they scarce covered them. There was a great light in the room, of many candles; and I saw that the window outward to the marsh was thickly covered and closely shuttered, so that no chink left room for a ray to escape. But though I saw the candles and the shutters well enough to remember them now, all I saw at the moment was the old man's eyes. These were huge, beneath hairless lids, and

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the white of them was red as the water in a marsh drain. The pupils were large and black, and shone like a glowworm on an August night. But strangest and most awesome of all were the centres, which were shaped like a pear, of a violet colour, and which widened and narrowed, swelled and contracted, glowed and died alternately, and in never ceasing change.

"Welcome Will Buddery," said he. "'Tis time your father's son should venture hither. Aha! He was a good lad. A good lad; and never had I surer mate to run the ankers swiftly and safely. But, poor boy, he went young."

Now my father was not a year short of seventy when he died of a surfeit. But he was hale and hearty, and in truth looked but a lad beside this wasted death in life.

"Hast told him, Ju?" asked the old man. "Hast told the lad what is to do?"

"I waited your permission, sir," said Judith. "He is but a stranger to us.'

"Nay, tell him, and that quickly," said the old man. "Ah! Curses on this ague. Were it not for that I could pull a good

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oar still, and show the way with the pole as well as Fred here. Tell him. You may always trust a Buddery when there is brass to be won."

I don't deny that I like brass; but it was not pleasant to have it mentioned at such a time. Who of us marshland folk does not love good brass, and the sport of winning it. Yet as Judith curled her lip, I was wroth with the old man.

"Nay, sir," said I, "brass or no brass, I am glad to do your will. You say you knew my father. Did you not find him a trusty and generous friend?"

"Trusty, ay," said the old man. "Generous, no. What do you of these parts know of generosity? Go to, young man; brass is the god of the country, and a good god, too. But now hearken to my girl. She will tell you what is afield, and how it is we have need of your help."

Well, I never saw much good come of what folk call generosity yet. So I did not say anything more, but turned to Judith.

"It's thus," said she. "The men are all away up the North River, bringing down a

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cargo of French brandy and lace, and some good Dutch gin, from Horsey, where they should be landed to-night. They will pole down the river and over Breydon by night, and should be here before dawn. But there's many ankers of good stuff, and a score bales of lace, as well as a couple of hundred of tobacco in the Mound cellar now. And more, there's Tom Catchpole there, who killed gauger Blagg in the fight at Lowestoft last week, and who was himself sore hurt, so that he was brought away with difficulty. This would have been of no import, but that in some manner, I know not, the gaugers have got wind of our hiding place here, and purpose to make raid upon us to-night."

"How know you that?" I asked.

"Fred, here, was at the 'Wrestlers' in Yarmouth to-night," said she, "and Lieutenant Forbes was blowing a cloud. He swallowed more liquor than he could hold, and began to brag to his men of what they would do before morning. You know that no one pays any regard to Fred; and it's not the first time he has warned us or given us useful information. As you must know

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(for he has often mentioned you to us) he is not so silly as the folk who jeer at him, and he heard every word of their plan. There are to be three parties to search for contraband; and, what is worse, they have learnt that Tom is hidden here, and have sworn to avenge their comrade. One party will come by road, one by river from Yarmouth, and one by river from Lowestoft. They were to wait signals, and then come on us all together. When Fred left the 'Wrestlers,' the river party was to start in two hours time. Fred came with his leaping pole across the fens of Breydon and Burgh, past Bradwell and Belton marshes, and would not take half an hour, where they would take two hours by river; for the tide is only just up, and they would make but little headway till the flood. But they will be here in less than two hours from this, and every anker, every bale, every roll of tobacco must be away before that, and to some sure place. And most of all must Tom be hidden elsewhere; for if he is taken it will be death, beyond all doubt. As you see, grandfather can do nothing.

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The marsh ague has come on him, and the herbs I have boiled and given him will not clear him of it before morning. There were only Fred and myself to be depended on, and we had no place to go to, even if we could get the man and the stuff away in time. I was half mad with terror and despair when I ran over the common in the hope of finding someone whom we might trust. But it was but a poor chance; for, as you know, the village folk do not love us, though they love to get their liquor and tobacco cheaply. They call grandfather a wizard and me a witch, because we can see things they cannot, and know what they do not. But when I heard 'twas you, I knew the spell grandad wove beneath the Mound had brought you. Now you have heard all. Say, what can be done?"

At first hearing it did not seem as if there was any hope of escape, either for the contraband or the wounded smuggler. And I knew that if the stuff were found near the Bell Mound House, Judith would run the risk of coarse handling from some of the revenue officers. These were a rough and evil lot

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at that time. The best of their sort had gone to sea to fight the French, and they were a low, thieving, rascally set of men, who were forced against their cowardice to contend with their betters, the contrabandists. Their very officer was well known to have used force to satisfy his passion for a seaman's daughter, whose father was with Nelson, and only the authority of his command, and the fear of the vengeance of the Government, had saved him from the righteous indignation of the fishermen. I could not bear to think of the danger.

"What boats have you?" I asked. "Are there enough to carry all the contraband?"

"It could be done, master," said Fred. "There's the reed cutters' flat bottomed boat and a pair of dingheys. Then there's the keel boat, which would take the lot, and more. But where was you thinking of going?"

"You think the reed cutters' boat and the dingheys will hold the lot?" I asked.

"Yes," said Fred. "I'm sure they will."

"The in God's name," said I, "bring

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me to them, and let us commence to shift the stuff. There is no time to lose."

"Right. Right for you, Will," cackled the wizard. "You're your father's own son. Go you about the lading, and leave me to my own work. What that is, you shall presently be aware."

"Come, Judith, come Fred," said I.

And Judith put her hand is mine as trustfully as if she had known me all her life, and led the way to the cellar under the Bell Mound.

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CHAPTER IV.

A TOUCH OF THE WIZARD'S ART.

At the back of the Bell Mound House was stored a stack of wood, and against this my conductress stayed her steps. "Pull those branches away, Will," said she, pointing to some faggots of small boughs. "You are stronger than I am."

I hauled at the faggots and they came away, disclosing a small door in the very side of the Mound. This Judith unlocked, and showed a narrow passage cut in the sand, and shored up by great baulks of seasoned timber. Through this a light was shining, and the girl bent her head to the low lintel of the doorway, and went in. "Follow after," said she. "We must tell Tom what he is to do."

I had to bow myself double to get within,

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but as soon as the door was passed the passage rose to a good height, and I could go on my way merely crooking my neck. I could see that the passage widened out into a hall or room, which was shored up and strengthened with mighty supports. The hidden chamber was round, and must have measured full thirty feet in diameter. One corner was heaped with tubs, another with bales, and from a third came the sweet pungent scent of the Virginian plant. In the centre of the chamber a brazier glowed, and it was warm and cosy as ever I saw a place to dwell in. The light came from an oil lamp which hung from one of the cross beams, and shed its uncertain light on a rough couch spread beneath. On a litter of dead bracken and ling a number of warm coats and plaids were strewn, and upon these lay a man whom I had known as the brother of Nellie Catchpole, between whom and myself there had been such love-making as might hap between a young squire and the daughter of a villager. He was a burly fellow, not so tall or straight as I, but broader and stronger knit, so that if it came to a

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trial of muscles it might be a pretty thing between us. That is to say, when the man had recovered his strength; for he lay there, pale and weak, with bloody bandages about his head, and with his right arm bound tight to his side in a sling.

"Ah, Judith, my girl," said he, his eyes brightening as they fell upon her, "so you are back. What luck? Why," he added surlily, "it's young Master Buddery. How comes he here? This is no place for the gentry."

"Nay, Tom," said Judith; "it is the place for any gallant man who will stand our friend. Fred has told you how things are, has he not?"

"Ay," growled the man; "but he said nought o' the young squire. What call has he to come here?"

"I've as good right as you, Tom," said I, feeling a little stirred by his sullenness. "My father was one of the moonlight traders before ever your folk came to these parts."

"Well, now ye have come," said Tom, "what is to do? I don't see how the likes of you can help me or little missy."

"Ah, but he can," answered Judith,

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brightly. "Can you not, sir?" And I own I was glad she called me "sir" before the man. For the first time it seemed strange to me that this peasant girl should have called me Will freely from the beginning, as though she were my equal. I had a notion that if she had a brother and he took the same licence, I should not have submitted to it with so easy a mind.

"It comes to my mind," said I, "that I'm the *only* man who could help you. Hearken, both of you. The stuff must be laden in the reed cutters' boat and the two dingheys. The keel boat will be too great. Tom, here, must be made as comfortable as may be in one of these, and Fred and I must pole the three craft, hitched together, in a line up the 'Run' on to the Mere. There we can unlade and put all safe in my great barn; and Tom may have an attic in the house. Fred may tend him there till he be well enough to be got away. For that he must quit here is certain."

"Is it?" grumbled Tom. "It's none so certain as that. What, man, think you I'll go and leave you here with missy?"

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I looked at Judith to watch how she took his freedom, and my heart leapt to see her anger flush in her face. Why should I care whether she favoured Tom or Jack, or any other of the band? What had she to do with me? Ah! How little can any man rule his heart. I dared not search my soul, for I knew that if I did I should learn that I loved this girl, this daughter of the wizard, the old man more feared and hated than any in the country since old Sir Hubert de Burgh died—for young Sir Hubert had not come to the full hate and contempt which he might have earned in after years.

She turned fiercely on the man, with all her face aflame.

"You would do better to guard your own matters," said she. "I know not by what right you dare to presume to choose who shall be with me and who not. But come. Thus is no time for wrangling. Quick with the contraband into the boats."

I felt it in me to add somewhat to her angers, but at the opening of my lips Soft Fred entered the cave.

"The flood is well up, master," said he

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"And I have brought the boats up the creek to the edge of the hard below the mound, and laid planks from the entrance to the water lest those who come should see our footmarks. 'Tis never well to leave feetings from the cave."

"Why, that's well done, Fred," said I. "So now to work."

The ankers of spirit were but a burden for one shoulder, and it was but child's labour for Fred and myself to carry them down two at a time. But this was tedious work, and I glowed with delight at her acuteness when Judith came running back from the house, whither she had been, with a wheel truck which might hold a dozen kegs at once. This ran most easily on the plank track, and it took but a brief space of time to transfer all the illicit contents of the cave to the three boats where they lay in the swollen dyke that ran from the Waveney to the foot of the Bell Mound.

A thought struck me as Fred and I filled the truck. "So you took the light away from the mound, Fred," said I. "And why was that?"

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"Why, master," said he, "'tis a signal which may be seen on the North River far above Yarmouth, and the party coming down from Horsey will know that something is amiss when they see it not, for they always spy through their night glass at Havergate Point. 'Twere well for them to keep the further side of Breydon water while these revenue curs are about, and I'll wager they'll harbour above Acle till the light shows to-morrow night."

"Then the old man will be alone," said I.

"Never heed for that, master," said Fred. "There's more to serve him than can be seen. Wizard is he called, and wizard he is. Nay, never heed for him."

He struck against me as he passed me in the passage to return for more cargo.

"Lord, master," said he. "You seem wholly hard about the pouch, and you sag out like a cow's udders at milking time. I trust your pouches are full with something of value."

Foregad, I had forgotten my bags of money which I had taken from the highwayman. But when Fred spoke their weight

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dragged on me, and I wondered how they had escaped my memory.

"'Tis a stone of lead, Fred," said I. "And you and I will try some at the fowl ere long."

He looked at me, and I saw his lean chaps grin in the moonlight. We had placed all the contraband contents of the cave in the boats, and it was time to see to the transport of the smuggler. Two or three hurdles lay outside the Mound, and Fred and I chose a stout one, and bore it within.

Catchpole greeted us with a curse. "I doubt but 'twere as well to leave me to be taken," said he. "I'll never stand the moving. However, as little missy goes wi' ye, I'll chance it. But why should little missy come to the Mere Farmhouse? Tell me that, Master Buddery."

"Fool!" I cried. "Would you leave her here to that villain Forbes? Know you not his way with a fair woman?"

"Well, have it your own way," groaned Catchpole. "But the sooner the quicker, so heave and hoist and let's get under way, and be d——d to you."

We took the coats and rugs from his

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couch and laid them on the hurdle, twisting them round to cover him from the shrewd bite of the frost. Space had been left in the rearmost dinghey, and when we laid him, coverings and all, on the spread of litter we had prepared for him, we went back to the Mound for Judith. She came to us from the house, and said to me—"Grandfather would see you before you go. Wilt come with me now?"

"Ay," said I, and followed her to where the old marvel shivered and shook in the ingle nook by the great fire of peat and wood. I will own that my heart was not in this second visit. There was something about the old image that chilled me to the bone, and made my flesh all goose flesh to the feel of me.

He had turned himself somewhat from the fire, and sat crouching with his face toward the space of the room. The wrappings covered his head as a cloak, and beneath their shadow his great glowing eyes burned to mine.

"Ehe, Master Will," he cackled. "The wizard's spell was wove, and the wizard's

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spell hath not called in vain. Hither to me, lad, for I have learnt that thou art knit to me in closer bonds of fate than was clear to me. And, girl, do thou come hither also, and take the lad by the hand. Nay. He will not bite thee. Wilt thou, Will?"

And the old devil cackled at Judith's newborn shyness. For the first time she drew back from me, and seemed to remember that I was a man and she a fair young woman. But she did her grandad's bidding, and the touch of her hand was warm to me, and the pulse of her blood set mine a galloping.

The wizard then reached out his bony fingers and clutched Judith by the arm. His eyes lost their glow of sense, and faded into dull hollows, filmed as though in death. I was afeared for him, and opened my lips to speak.

"Hush," whispered Judith, pressing on my hand. "He sees. He sees. Hearken to the seer when he tells his vision."

But I heard no word fall from him. I stayed, glad to hold the hand that was in mine, and it seemed strange to me that she

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should seriously regard this flummery. But (and how it happed I have no notion), as though a cloak were flung over my head and raised after a journey, of a sudden the sight of a fire and the old man left me. One instant all was dark. The next I saw Judith and myself, sitting in the kitchen of the Mere Farmhouse. Our heads were grey, and children played about our feet. While the vision was before me I heard a voice I knew for the wizard's; but it was strong and resonant as that of a youth.

"Put your love before your brass,
What ye wish shall come to pass.
Laugh at danger, trust, be true,
Happy years shall come to you.
Put your pouch before your heart,
Grovel safe a coward's part,
Love and life shall both be lost,
Choose your fate, and pay the cost."

For one moment methought I saw a mighty man seated in the wizard's seat, a man so strong in body and mind that I could have bowed me before him. Then I knew I had but been dreaming, for all was as before. The cowering figure shivering in his wraps. His fleshless hand on Judith's arm. His

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eyes glowing again with life, and, as it seemed to me, with a challenge of mockery.

"Well, friend Will," wheezed the broken utterance of the aged man, "hast had a touch of the wizard's art. See that thou bearest it in mind. Fare thee well."

His hand fell from Judith's shoulder, and he sank back again, huddled up, spreading his withered bones to the fire.

I tried to laugh, but the attempt choked me. Judith withdrew her hand, and that brought me to myself. "Gad! I've been dreaming. And with work to hand," said I.

"Think it not a dream," wheezed the eerie old man. "But thou sayest truth. There is work toward. Do it."

Then it seemed to me cowardly to leave this helpless piece of moribund humanity alone to meet the vengeance of the revenue officers when they should discover that they had been tricked.

"Wilt not come with us, sir?" I asked. "There's space enow, and 'twere caitiff's deed to desert a body to those who are looked for."

The old man broke into a horrid cackling

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chuckle. He waved his bones with awful eagerness. "Be off with ye," he cackled. "Have no fear for me. Search as they will they will not find me. Why, lad! has then the vision taught ye naught?"

"Come; come," Judith whispered. "You know not his powers. What he says, he can do. No human hand can fall on him against his will. Come. Think you I would leave him if there were hazard to him? Do his bidding. 'Tis best."

"Be off," repeated the wizard, "and bear thy lesson in mind. Think it not a dream. Stay; let me clasp thine hand before thou goest."

I fought with reluctance to touch him, and reached out my hand. The bones which gripped me were strong as steel springs. And, as my pulse beat with his, I again saw the vision. He let me go with a laugh, and, at a motion from him, Judith drew me, all dazed, from the chamber.

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CHAPTER V.

THE ESCAPE.

I HAD not much to learn of the water ways, but what I had I knew Soft Fred could teach me, so that I was fully content to see him standing upright with his shoving pole or quant in the reed cutters' boat, which was to lead the string of three. I took my stand in the second dinghey, and Judith sat in the stern of the third, where she could swerve our tail with a paddle at the curves of the narrow waters which we should have to pass on our way up to the Mere, and at the same time tend the wants of the wounded man who lay on the floor boards at her feet.

The mooring ropes were unhitched.

"Drive on!" cried Fred, and we drove together, one to starboard, the other to

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larboard, while Judith kept her dinghey off the dyke wall with her paddle. We straggled down to the river like a couple and a half of grey lag geese, and presently the reed cutters' boat shot out into the reach and swung to the left in the racing flood. Out on the tide we laid down our poles, and sat down to the paddles, which Fred had muffled, for the time was running on, and the less noise we made the better. God only knew how far distant any one of the three parties of gaugers and riders might be. The sky had quite cleared, and there was enow moon to show us the river walls on either side. A strong nor'-west wind had been blowing for some days past, and kept up the water in the North Sea, so that with the heavy rains we had had there was more water about than was common even in those days before the drainage was perfected as it has been since. And this was well, for we wanted every drop we could find for the passage of the "Run," which wound and twisted a good three miles from the river to the Mere.

The entrance to the "Run" lies little

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over a mile from the Bell Mound. At that time there was no sluice, and when we fetched to it Fred's skilful hand turned his craft into the rush of flood which was pouring up salt from Breydon Water. I stood up and poled in, and Judith paddled hard to follow, but the "tail" boat scraped the point of the "fleet" channel, and we paused to cover the mark she made lest those who were expected should track us.

For the first two miles of the "Run" the dyke flowed between flat walls of marsh and fen before it entered the great woods which ran on and surrounded the Mere. As yet we had neither seen nor heard aught of our enemies, but ere we entered the cover of the timber, Fred hissed softly to me, and sat low in his boat, for he had been standing again to pole since we entered the fleet. I followed his example, so that only the dark gunwales of the craft showed above the shelter of the walls, invisible from the river, unless there were eyes expectant of us, which could hardly be. Fred pointed astern, and I peered carefully where he pointed, keeping my head low. Out in the river,

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hugging the Norfolk side to keep out of the mid strength of the flood, a six-oared gig was being pulled with muffled oars. I could see the glint of the moonshine on steel. The cutlasses were naked, ready for action. We dared not stir; but, as we watched, the gig went past the mouth of the "Run" with never a stop, and as soon as she rounded the point of the reach we were sheltered by the river wall, which rose just there. Poling was no longer safe, and still bowing low to the level of the gunwales we got the paddles out, and pushed our craft along from the banks of the dyke. Judith handled her scull astern like a mistress in the art, as she indeed was; and we were about to enter the gloom of the woods, when a whistle sounded from the river. This was immediately answered from two quarters, one towards Yarmouth, the other ashore. The three parties were ready to make their raid. I thought of the old wizard, sitting huddled in his ingle nook, helpless, to my mind, with senility and with ague—that scourge of the fens—and every instant I waited for the yells of triumph, on the discovery of him, and the fiercer yells

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of disappointment on finding nothing to seize or compromise.

But Fred called to me in his low, but curiously distinct voice, "Drive on, master. Let's get under cover of the woods, then hey! for the best speed we can."

We drove on, and the woods checked all sound from the Bell Mound. What had happed I could make no guess at.

But strive as we might, our way was of necessity slow. Tough roots writhed out into the water from the trees; branches lay across, rotting in the dank decay. At every jar and jolt a groan came from the wounded man, and thrice in as many hundred yards Judith was fain to scoop up water in her hand and bathe the smuggler's head. Still, all seemed going well, when, at the thickest of the cover, a bare half-mile from the entrance to the Mere, shots rang out on either side of us, and immediately upon them followed shouts and yells, and the sounds of blows and of the fighting of men.

The strain of the shock withdrew my mind from what I was about. I looked ashore, though any fool might have known

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from the sound that the struggle was too far in to be seen through the thick wood. The boats had way on; and while my attention was taken off my proper business my dinghey swung under a low reaching bough (which Fred had ducked to escape) and knocked me clean over. As I splashed in I heard a cry from Judith, and, at the cry, I heard a shout from the woods which warned me that we were in danger of discovery. I thanked God the water was so up, for had there been less of draught I doubt not my head would have driven into the reeking ooze of the bottom, and God knows what the end might have been. But I rose in clear water, and swung inboard with some effort, cursing ungratefully, as I saw the drip fall on the bales of lace. The cold was death like, and my clothes stiffened upon me as the frost got hold. And, to make matters worse, the sound of fighting and shouting on the right bank sounded nearer. Then, flashing out in the darkness of the trees, came three shots, followed with heavy groans and yells of triumph. But we were moving now, swiftly and silently;

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and when I saw a figure rush to the edge of the "Run," astern, we were rounding a sharp angle of the dyke, and were safe hid before the unknown man was like to see us.

I heard a crashing and a swishing, and guessed that whoever it was had swung himself across by means of an over-reaching bough, in all likelihood that which had brought me to grief. Then followed more yelling and shouting on the left side. But we heeded it not, for the "Run" was widening for its outlet from the Mere.

Fred called again to me.

"It's the Lound poaching gang, and the keepers have come on them. Lord knows which is having the better of it. Drive on, master, 'tis no concern of ours. Heaven send they may not spy us as we cross the Mere. We'd best skirt close inshore in the shadows. 'Tis a bit further, but safer for this cruise."

Even as he spoke the water widened out, and we glided on to the calm sweep of the Mere.

"Quiet, master," hissed Fred. "The poachers may have done us a bit of good.

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Don't ye mind the three decoy pipes in this ham? Their keepers might have spied us, but I reckon they are busy enow with their oak staves without paying regard to the water."

He spoke truly. In my haste I had forgotten that in the first ham, or pool, of the Mere, three creeks were set with nets for catching the wild fowl which thronged the waters at that season of the year.

Each decoy was in charge of a man, and but that they must all have been drawn off for the fight, 'twere any odds but we had been spied. Indeed, the whirr of wings and the cuckering and quacking of the thousands of duck and smee, the honk of angry geese, and the clank of herons, could not have failed to draw notice to our passage. For the pool was full of bird life, and as we sped along the air was thick with their wings, and the still sheen of the water broken and ruffled with their rising.

My boat house lay on the shore to larboard, but we did not make straight for it, but sheered under the overhanging woods so as to be hid securely from any curious

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eyes. Fate had dealt well with us, and the noise of strife still echoed through the trees about the "Run," but faintly and distant, as we eased at the boat house.

I ever carried the keys of my great wooden barn at the water's edge about me. I tossed them to Fred, and the doors swung open. We hauled and drifted in till all were secure, and then the doors were closed and again safe locked.

I left my companions in the boat house while I ran along my cart track through the wood, up to the farmhouse. All was still. Old Faithful was standing in his stall in the yard, and whinnied when he saw me, eager to get within the stable to his loose box. But he had work to do. I led him out and harnessed him to a small tumbril, and by these means, without any stress of labour or trouble, I had all the contraband housed in the loft of the great corn barn, and Judith, Soft Fred, and the smuggler, safe in the farmhouse kitchen, within half an hour of our reaching my hard.

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CHAPTER VI.

A COMPLEX DEVELOPMENT.

So silent had we been that not a maid, woman or man in the house had been disturbed from their good sleep. The chief thing left to do before morn was to get us food and drink, and that without rousing old Mother Durrant. I offed with my boots, and stole to the larder with stocking feet, and had such good fortune in my search for meat and drink that a good game pasty and a gallon of ripe ale had gone the way proper for them ere we had burnt a fourth part of either of the long sixes which I lit. After some talk with Fred, the most fit chamber for the recruiting and concealing of the smuggler was decided. As I have writ before, Fred was no stranger to the farm, and no curiosity would be stirred by

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his taking up his quarters in the hay loft. There victuals and drink could be taken by him or by myself, and he was such a gallant trencherman, to the knowledge of all, that enow for two would pass as provender for one.

So we bore the smuggler to the loft, Judith coming with us, a dark lantern in her hand, and there we prepared to leave him with Fred. But this roused his anger.

"And will you," said he to the girl, "will you stay alone with young squire? Would your grandad ere comply with such a course? Nay, missy; better for you to remain here with Fred and me. Am I not one of your servants? Will ye not tend me in my pain?"

Judith flared up like a flame-struck straw lock. "Have done with your foolishness," cried she. "I stay not here longer than will give the gaugers time to find their error, and so leave the Mound. Would not my presence cause remark? How could I keep stifled in one chamber night and day? and safety would not permit me to go forth. Guard your own matters as before I bade

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you. Have care of your recovery, and trust to Master Buddery to give you free escape."

Catchpole snarled and cursed, and even made as if to rise from his couch; but his hurts were too great, and he sank back with a groan.

"Go your own ways, then," said he, rudely enow to my thinking. "Young squire was always one for the women. Ask my sister Nell, else."

Now this angered me much. I had no will that my passages of love-making with Nellie should come to Judith's ears. I knew not, indeed, how the man should have known of them, nor am I confident now; but I shrewdly surmise that the girl's vanity made her tongue longer than it should have been. I had not seen her, not to say kissed her, for six weeks. 'Twas most unfair to speak of her in such way.

I was the more wroth to see Judith draw away from my side, where she was standing.

"Fools' tongues are none to my taste," quoth she. "Master Buddery has naught to do with me, nor have I aught to do with where he throws his love. Come, sir," said

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she to me, "will you go down with me and advise me what is best to do?"

I offered her my hand, but she refused it disdainfully. "Nay, sir," said she, "I am not Nell Catchpole."

Now this was too much for my temper. "Why do you speak to me like that?" I cried. "What is the wench to me? Why, lass, we farmers of the marsh wed not without a good lining of gold to our wives' petticoats. I could have had my pick of many a buxom lass, with well filled pockets, for bride. There's Fanny Annison and Sophy Grimmer, either of whom would jump at me. 'Tis unkind of you to taunt me thus. I have done my best for you for love, and you requite me thus."

"Nay, sir," cried she, "there'll be brass for you out of the bales and ankers. Have no fear lest your chivalry should not be well paid. My grandfather said, as you may bear in mind, that the Budderies would do aught for brass. I am, to your thinking, but a portionless girl; pray spare to waste your courtesies upon me."

I began to stamp and swear, for I felt

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that I was ill-used. Why should a man be laughed at for loving brass? Is not a full pouch better than an empty? I have no agreement with those fanciful folk who talk as if gold were mould, for though they sound alike, the gold was ever my favourite.

But this saucy girl needed breaking.

"You make too much of this, madam," said I. "I but propose to serve you and your grandad, and sure that can be done without so much speech. When it is your will to go across common, I will beg leave to see you safe. After that, as I understand, there need be no more commerce between us, as it seems so little to your liking."

She softened at that. "Nay, Will," said she, laying her hand on mine as we stepped within the kitchen, "I meant not to be unkind. Certain is it that you have done a great kindness to us all for the mere asking of a girl you know not; and for a girl who may have none of that brass——"

But at that I burst out, "D——n the brass. For God's sake name it not again."

"Well, then," said she, and she laughed as she said it, "I will not."

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The old case clock in the kitchen struck four, and within an hour the men would be rousing. 'Twere best for all that Judith should not be seen.

"Think you the Mound is safe?" I asked.

"Ay," said she. "Wilt go with me, Will?"

"Yes, mam, for a sixpence," said I, laughing. "At least, for half a sixpence, which I will provide. Wilt have the other half?"

At this she blushed rarely, but answered not.

I knew not what had come over me to make the offer. Never was it my mind to wed any but a girl of my own station. I felt sheepish; ay, and doubt not but I looked it, for she glanced up at me, and said, "Have no fears lest I thould take you in earnest. Why, even now you are ashamed of your words. Come, let us go. Oh, what a thing is a man who puts his pouch before his heart!"

And at these words I remembered the vision at the Mound House, and felt the cur I was.

She admitted of my company till the Bell

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Mound came in sight, dark with its bare trees against the moonlit sky. There was no sign of the raiders, no sound of them. Down in the woods about the Mere all was quiet. What had happed in that fight in the dark, what had happed at the Mound House, neither of us could tell. But Judith had no fear. "Leave me now," said she, "should grandad desire to see you, he will let you know."

At the thought of leaving her my heart turned sick. "Nay, Judith," said I, and my voice trembled as I spoke; "may I not go with you to your house? Ah, girl! what hast done to me? I doubt I shall sleep but ill till we part that sixpence between us."

She did not flout me, but spoke earnestly.

"Take thought, Will," said she. "Be not so hasty in offering your love; bear in mind that I may be but a poor girl, unworthy to mate with young squire."

"Nay, Judith," said I, trying to catch her in my arms, "God knows you are worthy to be a king's bride."

But she avoided me, and, running a little distance before, she turned back, and cried,

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with a laugh, "And then there is another thing to be considered, mayhap the young squire is not worthy to be *my* mate!"

Me not worthy to be her mate! Me! A squire with a hundred and twenty acres of freehold, more than any other man in the parish of small yeomen! A man who might have married brass over and over again! Not worthy to mate with the wizard's granddaughter! 'Twas too much! I turned upon my heel and hied me homewards. But, as I went, her mocking laugh sounded in my ears and would not let me forget the sweetness of her face, the gallant challenge of her courage, the charm of her ways.

There was as yet no shimmer of dawn, but the air was biting more chilly, and the wind which had died in the night was waking again and crackling the rime-stiffened twigs. I hastened homewards, and stole up to my chamber with robbers' stealth. When I laid me down abed I heard Tom Rushmer, the team man, and Molly, the milkmaid, rousing in their attics above me. But I was aweary, and fell straightway into a dog's sleep.

'Twas Soft Fred who woke me when the

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sun was high, and the rime gone from the trees and grass.

"Wake, master," said he, "there's trouble afoot."

I leapt from my bed upon the instant, and my first thought was that I had forgot the bags of money in my pockets. I had been so heavy with weariness, and so taken with Judith's tiresome provocation, that I had cast my coat upon the hutch, careless of my adventure with the highwayman. Should I trust Fred? He had already wondered at the burden of my pockets, and I had always found him true as steel.

"Riders are scouring the country," said he. "Never has been such a to-do since I tasted pap. From Yarmouth to Loddon all the talk is of a masked night rider who stopped half a score of farmers on their way home from market yester night. A riderless horse came to the 'Three Tuns,' Haddiscoe, before dawn, and the saddle bore holsters, and in one of them was a great pistol. T'other was empty. 'Tis thought someone may have proved a match for the highwayman; but his body is nowhere to be found, and the

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night has kept her secret in spite of all those who are seeking. A keeper was killed, and two of his mates sore wounded in the fight in the woods; and Roger Thurston, the poacher, lies dead with a cracked skull. 'Tis said the gaugers and revenue riders were all mad, and that when they came to the Mound, lights flared all round them and led them into bogs and soft marsh till half were all but lost; and t'other half so affrighted that they went off in boat or a horseback as they best could—Lieutenant Forbes the first to run! Never was such a night known! Forbes found the cave, and searched it. But naught has been told of him you wot of. Truly hath the wizard more than matched the Government. Ay, long will it be ere they think to come upon the smugglers at the Bell Mound again. Sir Hubert (and be d——d to him) hath called out a posse, and hath sent a commission to you, master, to choose such men as you think fit from this parish to be ready to assist the law in any way he may provide. Never was there such a Sunday morn! 'Tis said Parson Harvey will preach upon the

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terrors of the night at church! Sir Hubert would be glad to see you as soon as may be. Burgh Manor is full of gaugers and officers. The village buzzes like a hornet's nest."

I had never known Fred throw off all tokens of his assumed simplicity so fully. Never heard him speak so long, or to such point. The night had taught him to trust me entirely, and I felt it would be best to return his confidence.

"See here, Fred," said I, "this is what happed to the night rider."

And then I told him plainly how I had felled him, had taken the bags of money and left him by the roadside, but whether alive or dead I knew not. I reached over to my coat and drew the eight bags of money out and showed him them.

"We may as well see what's in them," said I, and turned them out on the bed.

To be brief, though there was some little silver in the bulk, yet most of the brass was good yellow, and when we had reckoned up the full total of my spoils we found they came to but forty-three pound short of a thousand pound.

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"Gad!" cried I, "he must have had a good night's work of it—the villain!"

Fred laughed. "Nay, master," said he, "villain or no, 'tis hard for you to miscall him. 'Tis ill-gotten gains, indeed, which bring no good. You have no cause for complaint."

"Egad! you're right," said I. "But now to hide the stuff, and then to see to Sir Hubert. What if he desires to search my farm? Can you make a secret place for Catchpole?"

"Secret enow," said Fred. "I've hollowed out a space between the trusses, where he can lie as safe as a bug in a rug."

"Good," said I, "for Sir Hubert hath no love for me, though he deigns to lighten my pockets."

I put the brass in the old hiding place which my father, and his fathers before him, had used. And then I called to Mother Durrant to prepare meat. When I had well fed I escaped from the old harridan's curious tongue and was glad enow to do it, for she would not bide quiet, but kept mobbing (as the country folk say) about noises she had heard in the night till I could have throttled her, with all the good will in the world.

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CHAPTER VII.

SIR HUBERT DE BURGH.

'Twas past ten when I saddled the young colt (for I chose to take my three-quarter blood to Burgh) and rode out to attend the magistrate. The village was all astir, and the men were standing at the corners in their Sunday clothing talking and arguing like so many old women. They greeted me with their usual civility to one whom they knew to be of the best blood of the marsh, and I heard more than one cry of God speed; for they knew whither I was summoned, and never one of them but hated the baronet. The De Burghs had never been loved. They were of Norman stock, and the Danish and Dutch blood of the marshes had ever disdained to render feudal rights to those who were considered foreigners by

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the true marsh people. The present Sir Hubert had made himself even more detested than his father had been, for he was never one to spare the honour of any peasant girl who took his fancy, or whom he could betray by guile or force under the pretence that his manorial rights permitted such licence.

Along the Yarmouth Road I passed scattered parties of riders, some of whom were strangers, though most knew me well enow. They were riding haphazard, up and down the commonland, and were more jabbering and laughing than making any serious search for the dead body of the highwayman or whatever else they were looking for. I cantered on, with no small disdain at heart; for I knew no right Sir Hubert might claim to put me at his beck and call. Magistrate though he was, he had no power to raise forces, which seemed to be his design; nor could I guess what he would be at when he had gotten the men about him.

There was quite a troop of cavalry drawn up in the paddock in front of the Manor House, and as soon as I rode near the group

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Sir Hubert came out of it to greet me. He was a man some five years older than myself, tall and shapely, but without my thews and sinews. I thought I could have broken him across my knee with little enough effort.

"Why, Buddery," said he, and there was a grim smile about his lips, "how is it you do not keep better order in your parish? 'Tis monstrous! In one night nigh a score of honest farmers stopped and robbed hard by Burny Bush Hill; a savage affray between Lord Warrener's keepers and poachers; a missing rider (for none of us can say that the stray horse is the highwayman's); and a vain raid by the gaugers."

"I know not, Sir Hubert," said I, "what right you have to take me to task for what is none of my business. I am no magistrate to compel order. I am but a simple farmer, as those who I learn have suffered at the night rider's hands. How can I serve you that you should summon me here on Sunday morning?"

"Nay," said he; "you do yourself too little honour. You are well known as the squire of Fritton. Not a great title, per-

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chance, to be a pike amongst so many gudgeon; but if you claim to be the first man of the parish, you should wear your responsibility with more seriousness. What steps have you taken to bring the evil-doers to justice?"

"What steps are possible to me?" I asked, with some heat.

"Well, well," said he, with a sneer, "it may be I wrong you. I had forgot for the nonce that you are not on the commission; but how is it that you met not with this highwayman?"

"Surely, Sir Hubert," said I, "you have not sent for me to ask me vain questions! How can I tell how it was? I know not at what time the men were stopped, but I can tell you that I left Bob Annison at Belton four cross ways after I left you the other side of Bradwell, and perchance when I got to the hill the man had fled. As you know, we were late, and to my cost, at the 'Old Star.' 'Tis hardly for you to complain of what happed there."

"Perhaps not, perhaps not, Will," said he, with more pretence of friendliness. "And,

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moreover, perchance if the rascal had stopped you he would not have taken much for his trouble."

"You should know that, better than any," cried I. "I'd had enough without highwaymen before I left Yarmouth."

I thought this might stir his blood, but he continued to smile.

"But what of the gaugers?" he asked.

"Nay," said I; "there you know more than I, for I know naught. What have I to do with gaugers and their raids?"

"They say your father was not averse to a night afloat," said he. "What's in the blood——"

"'Twere better to leave my father's name out of it," said I. "'Tis more than I have done to meddle with smuggling, and that in the teeth of any man who says the contrary."

I could not but feel that this was not strictly true. For what had I been about over night if I had not meddled with smuggling? 'Tis true I had not been at a run of late, but I had a good cargo of contraband in my barn, well hid, and the know-

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ledge of this brought the colour to my cheeks till I could have sworn at my foolishness.

But he did not seem to note it; and, on a sudden, burst out laughing.

"Hast heard the gaugers' tale?" said he. "I'll swear never was such a comedy acted on river side before. My belief is that they were all drunk, and dare not confess to it. But come, Forbes is within, he shall tell you the story himself."

He called a groom to take my horse, and led me through the throng of folk who were gathered in front of the house.

There I saw a dozen or more overmarsh farmers, who nodded to me so soberly that I doubted not they were among the victims of the highwayman.

In the great hall of the Manor House, Lieutenant Forbes was composing his disturbance by means of a tankard of old October.

"This is Master William Buddery, Lieutenant," said Sir Hubert. "I beg you to do me the courtesy to repeat to him your story of the raid. He is of sound marsh blood (as these yokels call it, forsooth!),

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and may be able to give you a lead in the matter."

By that I saw that he had no suspicion of what I had been about. But I knew well enough that he was keen to find some reason to show me despite, so I played close.

Forbes took a lengthy pull from the tankard. "Gad, Sir Hubert," said he, "this tale telling is drouthy work; but if you'll order your man to bring me another tankard, I'll do my best."

The tankard was brought, and the lieutenant commenced his account. How true it was I know not, for I could never in after days persuade the wizard to speak of what happed. Whenever I mentioned it to him he would burst out in his horrible cackling laugh, and crow and exult till he went near to choke.

"There were three parties of us," said Forbes, "each seven strong. One came from Lowestoft by water, one from Yarmouth, and one rode. We met at the appointed time, and signalled when all were within two hundred yards of the Bell Mound. Not a soul did we pass or meet by water or road.

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I can speak for the water party from Yarmouth, and my men in the other parties swear the like. On the signal, we drew in from all sides, and I thought our work more than half done when we had surrounded the mound and the cottage under the shoulder of the hill. Then, as I gave the order to close in, a thickness fell till the night was like none ever I was out in. No man could see a hand's length in front of his face; but the boat parties were all landed, and we had seen the direction of the Mound. So I cried out to close in fast, dark and impenetrable as this awful fog loomed about us. Then, ere the first step had been taken, lights flashed in front of us, and a number of voices called 'This way.'

"My men swear that they knew the voices for those of their comrades; but as not a man spoke (so they swear) this could hardly be. However, all were encouraged by the lights and the friendly shoutings, and went towards the lights merrily. I followed one light that seemed to attach itself to me, and it led me straight to the Mound, and to a cave beneath the

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Mound, a very pretty piece of work. But the cave was as empty as my pockets are like to be over this affair; and more than that, what I saw there frightened me. I fear no man, but I don't pretend to be a match for the devil. Within the cave there was light, but what it came from Satan only knows. There was no lamp, no fire, nothing but a great empty space; but it was aglow with light, and all about its roof, from side to side, stars of light flitted and shone. There was no murk within, all was clear and bright as day; nay, brighter, for the light pervaded everything, and, in addition, the flitting stars glowed with the power of a thousand candles. And, while my heart stood still at the awful sight, I heard a great yelling and shouting without; and, both in fear of the place, and in anxiety for my men, I ran out of the cave as quickly as might be. A light went before me, and as it had led me friendly enough to the Mound, I followed it without distrust. The darkness was the darkness of hell. It weighed upon a man. I've seen the dark holes of punishment, and I tell you that these are light

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to that black terror. All about the marsh I heard my men shouting for help, and crying. I ran after the light before me, and, in a trice, I was up to my neck in a dyke, and my feet sinking in the ooze till my chin touched water. A score, nay, a hundred, hob o' lanterns flashed and flickered all about the gloom. And, to make our horror the more complete, now, from every light came yells of laughter. I gave myself up for lost, when something seized me. What it was I know not; but it was no man's hand, for it took me out of the ooze and water, and cast me on the bank as though I were a feather. I called to my men to strike flint and steel and endeavour to light their lanterns, but no sooner were these lit than they went out. And still from the dancing lights came the yells and shrieks of hellish laughter.

"My men were moaning and crying with fear. I heard some of the worst among them crying to God, and knew they must be at the extremity of terror. Then, on a sudden, the fog lifted, the lights vanished, and there were we all, each party by his boat or horse,

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as it might be. The Bell Mound and the cottage showed clear and peaceful in the moonlight, and not a sound was in the air save the cries of the men.

"But clear or foul, we had had enough of the place. Quicker than ever duty compelled the boats were filled, the horses mounted. And, though the horsemen went their own way, my men refused to part company, and both Lowestoft and Yarmouth boats came down river to bring up, as you know, Sir Hubert, at your own staithe of Burgh."

"You hear, friend Will?" said the baronet. "Now tell me (for a man so liked as you should know) is there not some talk of a wizard at the Bell Mound?"

In spite of myself I could not but start. Good God! what if this villain should seek the place and see Judith!

"Pooh, Sir Hubert," I cried, "sure you pay no regard to old women's fables. I have heard that an old man, one Mallard, lives at the Bell Mound House, and the ignorant country folk miscall him wizard. But wizards and witches are not for men of station.

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Leave such children's tales to the old wives of the village. The Lieutenant is not the first man who has been bogged by a hob o' lantern, nor will he be the last. Why, I've seen them myself on the marsh as thick as flies in summer."

"I'll trouble you, Mr. Buddery, not to call my report to his worship here an old woman's tale," cried Forbes, with great heat.

"Nay, Lieutenant," said Sir Hubert; "friend Will here meant no harm. These men of marsh blood are used to the lights and sounds of the fens, and I doubt not that had a marshman been with you he would have saved you all this affright."

"But the devils will not aid the revenue," cried Forbes. "Many a time have I tried to bribe them to guide me in their cursed waterways, but the only one who did left me stuck on the mud in a d——d flat dyke on an ebb tide, and escaped over the fen with his leaping pole. A murrain on the marsh folk, say I."

"Friend Will," said the baronet, looking me close in the face, "as you say, 'tis not for us to credit wizards, ghosts, or goblins.

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What say ye? Will ye ride with me to the Bell Mound? You say there is report of one Mallard there. Let's see if he can make geese of us."

"Your worship," cried Forbes, "with all due respect, I would remind you that men who are ready to risk their lives in the service of their country should not be called geese."

"Be not so hot, Lieutenant," said Sir Hubert. "But to deal with marshmen you need one of marsh blood. That is. why I am going to ask my friend here to accompany me to the Bell Mound. I crave your permission to give some few orders, Will," he added, "then I am at your service to ride to the wizard. Ho! Ho! Wizard!"

"Sir," said Forbes, when the baronet was gone, "Sir Hubert treats this matter too lightly. I beg you have a care. 'Tis true that we went by night, and you have the high sun over you. But what happed last night was by no mortal hand. And whether there be such things as wizards or witches, or no, I take it there is a Devil."

I thanked him civilly, and, to speak truth

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I had no pleasure in the proposed visit to the Mound. I knew what I myself had seen, and could not but credit that Forbes, like myself, had had a touch of the wizard's art. Though I made to laugh at wizards and witches, we fen folk know well enough that the black art is practised, ay, and that scarce a village or a marsh level but has its crone or warlock. Moreover, if I went with Sir Hubert, might not the wizard regard me as a betrayer? But if I refused to go, the man might go by himself—for he was no coward—and I could not bear to let him see Judith unless I were there.

So when he presently returned I took my leave of Forbes, mounted my horse, and cantered off beside the man whom I hated as well as any on earth.

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CHAPTER VIII.

SIR HUBERT SEES JUDITH.

We rode out into the Yarmouth highway, and cantered easily to the common. There was little speech between us, but thrice I caught Sir Hubert's eyes on me, and there was the light of eager mockery in them.

When we drew near the bridle path across the common, Sir Hubert checked his horse. "Know you the road, Will?" he asked, looking slyly at me.

"I only know the new road, as 'tis called," said I, "that leads from Fritton village to the viper gorse, not far from the Bell Mound." For I was in no mind to let him know the bridle path, or that I was aware of it.

"It comes to my mind," said he, "that here, or hereabouts, I struck a way through the gorse one morning, when I was searching

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for a wounded woodcock. Sure you should have seen it, who take your sport so often on the common."

I knew he meant to jibe me for the little land over which I could shoot private, but I showed no suspicion of his intent.

"There is, indeed, a footpath," I said, "but I fear it would prove but ill going for our cattle. Without you are in great haste, 'twere safer to take the longer way."

"Why, there's the path," cried he; "and a very fair bridle path it looks. Come, a spice of hazard should not be unwelcome to one who takes so kindly to the fall of the dice. I'll wager you took more risks last night than ever we shall this day by the path. Nay, man, if you hang back I'll lead the way for you in your own country."

It irked me to let him do it. But I thought that if he led, those who watched on the Mound (and I could not doubt that there was some watch kept, whether the party from Horsey had returned or no) would see the danger more readily than if I were in front. So I swallowed my pride, and let him jeer at my caution as he list.

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But had he known it I was shaken with laughter to see the pitiful manner in which he walked his horse down the track where I had ridden double at a gallop not twelve hours since. And when I came to see the rabbit holes and mole puts in daylight I wondered that Judith and I ever got through with whole necks.

"By gad, Will," said Sir Hubert, "you were in the right of it. 'Twill take us thrice as long to pick our way amidst these d——d pitfalls as it would have had we gone by the road. There must be rare sport with the white tails here! But see," he cried, pulling his horse to a stand, "see that mole put. It bears the mark of a horse's hoof, that was not made a week ago, I'll wager. We are not the first to risk the ride it seems. Now who can it have been? Can you give a guess?"

He peered sharp at the prints made on some fresh rabbit earth by my colt's shoes, and I thanked my stars that I had ridden old Faithful over night. A woman could see that the light shoes I used for the three-quarter blood never made that splodge on the mole put.

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"Is there not some talk af a riderless horse?" I asked. "Perchance he wandered this way after losing his master."

"There's more in this than you think," cried Sir Hubert. "The highwayman stopped all his men hereabouts. Who can tell that the horse was unmounted when he passed? Who can tell that the night rider doth not hale from the Bell Mound or near it? What say ye to that? 'Twould account for your not having met with him."

"He might have rid towards Haddiscoe, where the horse was found," said I.

"Well, it behoves us to go cautiously," said Sir Hubert. "Are you armed? If we come upon the man, 'tis ten to one but he's a desperate fellow."

"Nay," said I, "why should I go armed in broad day?"

"I do," said Sir Hubert, with a grin.

And I looked at his holster, and saw, indeed, that he had a brace of pistols with him.

We rode on, and, as luck would have it, old Faithful had plunked his forefoot in another mole put on his way homeward, after I had sent him off by himself. 'Twas my turn

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to pull up and draw Sir Hubert's notice to the print.

"The track runs both ways," said I. "'Tis odds but that 'tis the riderless horse after all."

"It may be, it may be," said the baronet. "Well, well, let us jog on to the Mound."

The track ran with more level turf, and we cantered. When we stayed for a breather on the summit of the rise, whence the Bell Mound may first be seen from the common, I saw an instant's flicker, and guessed that we had been spied. It made my heart easier, for I knew we should not come upon the old man and his granddaughter unawares.

Sir Hubert saw naught. At any rate, he said naught. And the flicker was so quick that had I not been on watch for it I might have missed it. Moreover, Sir Hubert's eyes were not the eyes of a marshman, as long training and true blood had made mine.

We rode down to the Mound, and there checked our horses, for, as has been before mentioned, to eyes not in the secret of the

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swinging bushes, there seemed no continuation of the way but the path to the left, which led to the river.

"A check, by the Lord!" cried Sir Hubert. "Know you not of some way to this cottage where the old man dwells? Sure, the locality must be familiar to you."

I'll make no bones about it, but own I lied. "Nay," said I, "I told you I knew naught of the man or his mysteries."

But while I was speaking Sir Hubert's keen eyes were peering here and there, and, as luck would have it, either Judith neglected in her hurry of the previous night to properly close the covered gate to her cottage, or the Revenue riders had disturbed it in the terror of flight, for where the ends of the swinging bushes should have met there was a space.

"Aha!" cried Sir Hubert, "a shrewd contrivance, and one redolent of a desire for secrecy. See you there, friend Will, that clump of bushes was never set by nature."

He leapt from his horse, and, at a touch, the entrance gaped wide. With a triumph-

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ant laugh the baronet mounted his horse again and rode him through on to the pathway beyond. I followed, not without anxiety lest the folk of the Mound should have trusted over much to the security of their abode.

But when we were at the cottage there was no sign of man, woman, or child. There was still a thin reek of smoke rising from the chimney, but that was the only sign of life to be seen.

Sir Hubert rode round the cottage to the Mound, and tethered his horse at a sapling which grew on the slant of it. I looked curiously to where I believed Judith had taken me to the door of the cave, but, to my surprise, there was naught to be seen of the doorway. The Mound fell down in a sheer wall of sand, and neither entrance nor stack of faggots was visible. Had then the whole thing been a dream? Nay, that could hardly be. Was not Tom Catchpole in my loft? Did not Judith, Soft Fred, and I, transport the contraband from the cave itself? Verily it appeared as though I should never fathom all the wonders of the Mound.

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What was this Mallard? Wizard indeed? I had some cause to think so. But wizards and witches and the bright light of high sun do not agree. Once again I was dazed, and scarce knew what I was about.

I tethered my horse likewise, and saw that Sir Hubert had made his way to the door of the cottage. He rapped loudly with the butt of his horse whip; but there was no response to his summons. He rapped again, with quick, violent blows. This time a feeble voice was heard to answer: "Come ye in; come ye in, Sir Hubert de Burgh. Deign not to stay for the permission of a poor, helpless old man. 'Twas never your way to show such courtesy to the humble and meek."

"God's death!" cried Sir Hubert (and his voice was subdued); "what voice is that? How knows the thing that spoke who stands without? Fool that I am! We were spied as we rode past. Come, Will, let's beard the wizard in his den."

With that he flung open the door, which answered to the simple latch. The weak voice called again when we were within

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the passage. "Take the trouble, your worship, to enter the door to your left."

Sir Hubert again seemed moved by the awful debility of the accents. But, with a "pish," he strode to the door indicated, and entered the room where I had seen the wizard.

The shutters and heavy coverings were gone from the window. The candles and their sconces were not to be seen. The white light of the December sun poured through the window, but at first Sir Hubert failed to see where the old man still sat, cowering in the ingle nook, for the wall of the chimney kept him in shadow from the sun, and the only light which struck directly upon him was the uncertain glow and flicker of the peat and wood, which were blazing and aglow as I had seen them before.

One instant I met the old man's eyes full upon mine, and there was a shimmer of humour within them. I felt that the strange being knew I was no traitor. The eyes burned with the same vigour which I had thought so remarkable, but only for the fraction of time when they were on

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mine. Immediately they became filmed and dull, as the eyes of a man with body and soul worn out with the extremity of age.

"I give you greeting, Sir Hubert," said the wizard. "For what am I indebted to this honour?"

Sir Hubert was staring at the frail, skeleton figure. "Sure, Will," he whispered in my ear, "there is no strength for energy about this old wreck; no possibility of power or will to play such tricks as that fool Forbes tells of."

"Your pardon," again wheezed the horrible voice. "Will ye not honour me by seating yourself in my poor chamber?"

"I thank ye, old gentleman," said Sir Hubert, sitting down on an old oak settle, at some distance from his host. "I have come hither on account of certain strange things given me in information by one Lieutenant Forbes, of the Revenue service. He declares that he and some score of his fellows came hither last night, and were befogged, led astray by lights and mocking voices, thrown into bogs and ditches, and so terrified, that they fled incontinently to

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Burgh. He made mention of some strange chamber beneath the Mound, whither he was led by a light, and where he was dismayed by hob o' lanterns. He said that he had learnt that this was the home of a gang of contrabandists, that one Tom Catchpole, who killed a gauger but last week, was concealed in the chamber beneath the Mound; and, if I may believe him, his raid was brought to naught by sorcery.

"He! He! He!" cackled the old man. "Nay sir, you can see for yourself how formidable a traverser of justice am I. Even now I can speak with difficulty, so sore smitten am I with the ague of the fens."

Sir Hubert whispered again to me, "The whole crew of 'em were drunk, Will. What could this poor old scarecrow do? But I must e'en press him further. Gad! I'll repay the fool for sending me on this wild goose chase."

"But what of the cave?" he asked aloud. "What use may such a secret place be put to by honest men?"

"Cave, your worship!" cried the old man. "Nay, I know of no cave. Seek

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for yourself, your worship. These be idle tales. What should I do with a cave? I who can hardly keep upon my poor seat for shivering."

Indeed he was shaking and trembling so violently that I feared to see him fall into the fire.

"But if you can do naught your gang may," said Sir Hubert, rising.

"Gang? What gang have I?" wheezed the old fellow. "My poor grand-daughter tends me alone, an ill-featured lass, but kindly. Gang, quotha! Gangs need to be paid."

"I'll take you at your word, old man," cried the baronet. "Will, will you keep here to look after the old man while I make search?" he whispered to me. "This old fellow is too innocent. Watch lest he communicate with his fellows, if fellows he have. I'll go and search the house and Mound."

Now, though I had been unable to see the entrance to the cave, I could not doubt that a close search would discover it, and convict the old man of false speaking. But I feared to refuse to stay, lest Sir Hubert might suspect something from that alone.

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"As you please," said I. "But the quicker you are the better I shall be pleased."

He left us, but, until his steps were heard without, the old man made no sign.

Then, however, he bent his eyes upon me, and once again they were full of fire and vigour. He whispered, and his voice was stronger, and, as he spoke, his shiverings left him.

"Will," said he, "a rare night's work. Keep to it, lad, and you shall have your heart's desire. Ay, as much brass as you choose."

"Stay, sir," said I, "I have not forgot your words. I'll not put my pouch before my heart. Take some other way to win me."

I thought he looked shrewdly at me, and he chuckled. Had Judith told him of the sixpence I wished to halve with her.

"But the cave?" I asked.

"He'll never find it," said the old man. "But we've found the traitor who told of it. He will tell no more tales."

"What?" I cried. "Have you killed him?"

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"Seek to know naught but what I tell you," said he. "There are difficulties before us all. Ay, more than you have any knowledge of. But hist! He must not guess that we have met before."

Sir Hubert came striding back, and if ever a man was in temper he was. "Cave!" he cried. "There's no more cave than a hole through the sand. I'll search the house old man, and if, as I believe, you have spoken truth, and there is no one concealed about it, I'll spare to trouble you further. D—— the fools!"

He stormed out, and I could hear him opening and shutting doors above, and then in the outhouses. The old man said no more to me, but sat, with now and then a cackle of laughter.

Back again came Sir Hubert. And I believe all would have gone well, and much trouble and blood have been saved, but just as he was about to take his leave Judith ran in with a basket full of herbs which she had been gathering in the warm lays beneath the gorse and ling upon the common. A more unlucky chance never happed. For

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soon as the baronet's eyes fell upon her they glistened with the evil passion of the man.

"So this is the ill-favoured wench, is it?" cried he. "Nay, my lass, have no fear. You are too lovely to be left in this lone place, with only an ill-seeing or ill-judging old rascal, who calls you ill-favoured. Nay, by God, I'll show you better sport than tending old scarecrows."

And with that the brute, careless as ever when engaged on an amour with a village girl, ran to her and threw his arms about her.

"Fore gad," he cried, "a kiss for me. Never have I pressed such tempting lips."

But in a trice I was upon him. I tore him away, and flung him against the wall, breathless with the force of his impact.

He all but fell, but saved himself. Then he turned and faced me.

And in the midst of the tension of the moment Judith came to me and whispered, "Secure something of his wear and run. His glove, his kerchief. Anything. Oh, my friend, I thank you, ah! how gladly."

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CHAPTER IX.

THE FIGHT.

THOUGH the first sight of Sir Hubert's face after he had recovered himself showed it distorted and writhing with passion, he speedily restrained his temper, and when he spoke he did so softly, with a sneering tone, which was more relentless than any bluster of rage.

"So ho!" he said, very gentle, "I knew not the girl was your own light o' love."

Judith flushed, and made as if to rush at him, but I put her back, and cried furiously (for I never had skill to conceal my feelings): "You lie in your teeth, you cur. Have you no more to say to a blow than that? Must I call you coward, and give you coward's blow?"

"Your birth will not permit me to go

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out with you," said he. "But my servants shall scourge you when and where they find you."

Now, though the bucks and exquisites of town had the custom of settling their quarrels with the duello, and trying their chance upon hazard of bullet or steel, we gentlemen of Norfolk were wont to take our cudgels, or our honest fists; and the best gentleman in the county could not refuse a bout of fisticuffs on challenge without submitting to the contempt of his fellows.

"'Tis courteous of you to warn me," cried I. "But first I would remind you that there is a fair space of turf without, and we have our fists with us. Come, sir, I have heard you claim some skill at an Englishman's way of fighting. Must I try the feel of your cheek again before you pull off your coat like a man?"

As was the fashion of the time with the young men about town, Sir Hubert had, in the days of his short course of reckless living in London, put on the mufflers with Jackson, and many a time had he thrown in the faces of us country folk the skill which

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he had acquired, comparing the swiftness and delicacy of his boxing with the action of a thoroughbred, whilst ours was but as the lumbering gait of a farm horse.

"Come," I pressed him, "could not Jackson learn you courage, as well as swiftness? Mayhap that swiftness is for running rather than fighting."

"Come out, curse you," said he. "And kiss your mistress ere I spoil your face for her."

Though I could not claim to have boxed with the great master, I had had some bouts with Tom of Hopton, and I felt confident that if I could get one blow in it would be enough for Sir Hubert.

So I whispered Judith to fear nothing (though I believe there was no fear in the girl), and I stepped out after the baronet as joyfully as if I were going to my wedding, or to take a tidy lump of money.

Sir Hubert threw off his coat and bared his neck of his stock. Then, when I was in my shirt sleeves, he stepped to the middle of the grass plot before the cottage and put his hands up. I could not but confess that he shaped prettily. His left arm was

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doubled back to about three-quarter length and held straight, the knuckles outward. His right was crossed over his breast, and held not more than six inches from his body, the back of the hand being outwards. His legs were wide, his knees bent, and he trod on tiptoe very light, and dancing. My style was more old-fashioned, for I held my hands across, the left fist forward, at a level with my chin. We were about the same height, but I must have scaled over a stone the heavier, for though he was older and perhaps more set I had a great girth, and my bones and muscles were nigh twice the size of the baronet's. Still, I knew that quality tells as well as size; and since Sir Hubert's ruined fortunes had sent him back to his manor house, he had lived a moderately sober life, and I could see that he was in the pink of condition, whereas I may have carried a trifle more flesh than should be seen in the ring. What with his superior skill (as I did not doubt) and my greater strength (which I was moderately certain of) we were like to make a pretty match of it.

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I squared up to him, and as soon as my guard was up he was through it and had landed sharply on my face. I tried at his chin, but he ducked sideways, and came in under my left arm with a good blow under the heart. It staggered me for a second, and he hit me twice in the face before I recovered myself. First blood to him, for his last blow was on the nose, and brought blood to my nostrils and tears to my eyes. But, bless you! I could have stood such punches in the face for a summer morning and still had hopes to win. But I saw that I had underrated both his skill and his strength, for his blows came sharper than I would have believed was possible from such slender wrists and arms.

Again he got through my guard upon the neck, but I rushed in and with a half-arm blow I caught him full on the forehead, and over he went on the grass, as if he were shot. But he was up again instantly, and I stood back while he shaped again. Though a blow on the brow rarely does more than give a clean knock-down, Sir Hubert seemed somewhat dazed, and I ventured to take

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a liberty and strike for his face with my left and his body with my right, simultaneously. It may be he was feigning, for he ducked swiftly to the left and brought his right hand full on my mouth, and his left on the mark. It was my turn to go down, but I was as quickly up as he had been. He, however, did not stand back, but came at me ere I was properly on my feet. It was foul play, and he suffered for it, for from my knees I struck upwards, and the full force of my right arm took him on the mark and made him gasp and stagger back. Before he could get his wind I was up and on him again. He dodged and feinted, and kept to his guard for a space. I could see he was trying to get his wind back, and it was my game to prevent it. So, heedless of the blows he rained on my face as I rushed in, I went at him hammer and tongs. I broke through his guard with sheer strength, and while he pounded at my face I kept my chin low and struck hard with both hands over his heart. He again staggered, and for a moment dropped his guard. I swung my right fist round him

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and struck him over his reins, and when his head flung up at the blow, I hit out with my left and fetched the point of his chin. He threw up his hands with a groan, and fell senseless.

Then I remembered what had happed to the highwayman, whom I caught on the same place, but with not half the force, for I was now blood hot, and my blow went home like a battering ram. I dropped on my knees beside him, but before he would have been counted out he came to himself, and rose, and shaped again. I liked his pluck, and again stood back to let him get his wind. I was glowing with the fight and the joy of it, and had ceased to greatly reck of the winning or losing of the battle, so that it continued. There is no sport in the world like the fair trial of well-matched men, and that we were well matched had been proved beyond a shadow of a doubt.

He gave three or four great deep breaths, and came on as fresh as paint. Nor did he show injury, for none of my blows had got home upon his face. I thought afterwards that he had trained to guard his beauty—

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that d——d devil's handsomeness which had wrought so much evil in its time.

He led off with his left at my face, but I guarded, and countered hard enough to make him give ground, though I did but strike his guard. Then I rushed in again, and rained in half-arm blows, some of which got well home. I suppose he could see it was all up with him when it came to "in-fighting," and that he could not keep me out, and that his false pride made him careless of honour, for as I drew back from a rush I saw his hand shoot to his hip, and in a flash there was the glint of steel above me.

"Villain!" I cried, with a gasp (for my wind was none the better for the fight), and with never a thought of escaping the down stroke of the steel I ran in again. The steel struck me on the left shoulder, for I turned somewhat as I saw it flashing to my heart and threw my shoulder up to meet it. But at the same instant as I felt the sting of the stab I struck with all my might full on the jugular.

He went down without a groan, and lay huddled up, white as death.

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Had I killed him? I cried to Judith to bring me brandy and a basin of water, and heard her answer me. While she was getting the restoratives I listened at Sir Hubert's heart. It was pulseless, and a great fear came upon me. Yet I had struck him that fatal blow in self-defence from his cowardly attempt with the steel. But this seemed different from the encounter with the highwayman. 'Twas any odds but that if I had killed him I should swing for it.

Judith came running out, as pale as Sir Hubert. "Oh, your poor face," was what she said.

"Throw water on his head, lass," said I, taking the brandy and forcing some into his lips. I raised his arms and drew them up and down twice or thrice, then I tried him with more brandy. I was glad to see that he swallowed it. Another sup of brandy, and he gave a sigh which was sweet to my ears. I took a cloth which Judith had brought and waved it in his face. Then he opened his eyes and sat up.

But all this time the steel had been sticking in my shoulder. Judith, who had done

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my behests in watching the baronet, saw it, and cried out, "The villain, the villain; I knew not that he had struck you with it. I thought you avoided it. Oh, Will, how could you forget?"

She put her brave hand to the hilt of the dagger and pulled it, and the blood came gushing out.

"Keep it," said I faintly. "You asked me for something of his wear or use. That should serve, for 'tis certain that he hath used it."

But she would not play at indifference, but insisted on binding up the wound as tightly as might be till it could be properly tended withindoors. And by now Sir Hubert was struggling to his feet.

As is ever my habit after a fight, I rose and offered him my hand, though sore it went against the grain after his foul attacks, first when I was on my knees, and second and worse with the stilet. For when the steel was withdrawn I saw it was round-bladed, a weapon such as the southern races of Italy use, and deadly in a skilled hand.

But Sir Hubert, like the ill-blooded cur he was, spat at my hand, and but that he

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could hardly stand, and the pain of my shoulder, I doubt but that I should have gone at him again for such a dirty offence.

"Keep your hand to ward my vengeance," said he, faintly, and snarling and showing his eye teeth like a savage dog. "'Twould have been better for you a thousand times had the stilet gone home. Oh, be sure I will reward you and the hussy you protect."

"Come, man," said I, "go and spit your venom elsewhere. This pretty toy will I keep in memory of one who drew it, during a fair fight at fisticuffs, on a man who had twice stood back to give him recovery. Go, there's your horse. For God's sake go, for if you put your foul affront on this girl, or on me again, I cannot answer for myself, and the next time you may die, and be d——d to you."

He turned and cursed, but he did my bidding, and it must have been bitter for him. He walked slowly and weakly to his horse, mounted it, lashed spitefully at my nag, and rode off over the common. Then I swooned, for the withdrawal of the stilet had cost me much blood.

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CHAPTER X.

AFTER THE FIGHT.

WHEN I came to myself I was still lying on the plot of grass. Judith was bending over me, holding brandy to my lips; and weak and but half-conscious as I was, I saw she was weeping, and I loved to see her tears, for I knew they were shed for me.

But what surprised me was to see the place full of men. A score of stalwart and hearty fellows were standing round, with the knit worsted jerseys, and high boots, of men who lived their life about the waters of the marshes. When they saw that I was come to myself they raised a cheer, and pressed forward to take me by the hand.

Judith smiled up at them. "They are our men," she whispered, "and they have heard how you have defended me. Ay, and

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more than one saw the fight; for they were all hid about the gorse and ling, watching lest that villain should have the best of it, and so push his evil further."

"I don't understand," was all I said.

"No matter now," said Judith. "Here, Dick and Harry, lift Master Buddery on the litter, and bear him within."

But my strength came rapidly to me, and I struggled to my feet. "Nay," said I, "I can e'en make shift to walk. Little ails me but the loss of blood."

She led me to the cottage, while the men shouted out to me with simple encouragement and approbation.

"He's the right sort, and no mistake. He's a man, that's what he is. Stick by him! Ah! that we will. Let old knifer look out. Let him dare to lay his hand on him again."

At each step I grew stronger, and when I came within, and saw the wizard standing by the ingle nook, leaning on a stout crone stick, I held my hand out, without fear or repugnance. For I knew now my lot was thrown in with his, and I rejoiced that it

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should be so; for from that day forth I felt that my lot was Judith's, and her's mine.

The old man's face was aglow, his wonderful eyes full of strange light and flame. But there was an added kindliness in them which I had not seen before, and which heartened me to take his grand-daughter's hand, and, with it in mine, to face him.

"Not yet, young man, not yet," said he, shaking his head, but not unkindly. "But let me first see to the wound. Your face Judith hath tended while ye swooned. After we have given as much care to your life as she has to your beauty (He! he! he!), we will make you one of us if it be your wish."

He bade me sit, and swiftly, and with incredible skill and tenderness, he bared my flesh of the bandage which Judith had made fast upon me.

"A mere flesh slit, said he. "The healing lotion, girl, hot water, lint, and the green unguent. Nay, be not so pale about it. I promise ye he shall be as well as ever in two days time.

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He bathed the wound with hot water, and gave me a cordial to sup as the blood again gushed from me. What composed the draft I cannot tell, but it glowed like fire through my veins, so that I felt no weakness from the flow of blood. The lotion bit into the open wound, but in a few moments the pain was gone, and a comfortable warmth dulled all sense of injury. Then he applied the unguent, green with curious herbs and mottled like the egg of a plover, or hornpie as the marsh folk call the bird.

A strap of plaister, another sup of cordial, and I was my own man again. And yet not that neither; for more than ever was I Judith's to die or live for. I pulled my shirt over my shoulder, and the dear girl happed me on with my coat.

Then the old man strode firmly to the door, and called aloud to the men. His ague was gone. And I never knew how much was real, how much assumed; but I think it was real enow over-night, and I have oft seen him shivering since.

"Come in, all of ye, and give your votes if Master Buddery shall have our sworn

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aid; ye know what perils may come. He hath made an enemy of a powerful man, a man who sticks at naught to come at his vengeance. But is he worthy to be one of us? I leave it to you to say."

And the men set up a great shout, and held their hands high, crying, "Let him take the oath with us, let him take the oath, and we are his men, as we are yours and little missy's here. Ay, he is of true marsh blood. God bless him."

A wizened old fellow came to me, and held out a horny fist. Small was he in stature, and shrunken in limbs, but the sinews of his bare forearms stood out like ropes.

"Lad," said he, "you're your father's own son. Hast heard him speak of Bill Prettyman; and of the time when he and I stood off half a score of revenue hogs at the half-mile point on Breydon Water? Right glad am I to see ye."

Many and many a time had I heard my father tell the tale. Ever with the warning, "And mind you don't get up to any such tricks, you young dog." I grasped the old

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fellow's hand, and his grip told me that he was my man.

The wizard watched us, with a grim smile lending youth to his aged features.

"Silence," he cried. Then, with great solemnity, he bade me hold up my right hand high. Then he spoke again—

> "Come woe, come weal,
> Bullet, cudgel, fist or steel,
> By the waters, by the fen,
> By the troth of Englishmen
> Swear so long as we be true
> Each shall find a mate in you."

As he recited the jingle the men joined hands round. The wizard, Judith and I, were in the centre of a human circle, which as soon as the ring was complete, revolved slowly, the way of the sun.

"Swear," said the old man.

"I swear," I cried. "True will I be so long as you be true. True to my heart's blood."

A shout went up from the circling company, for though I had sworn they still continued to revolve.

Then the wizard took me by the left hand, and Judith by her right.

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"Should the future danger bring
To the maid within the ring,
Here I ask ye, comrades true,
What would any of ye do?"

"Die for her," came from those hearty throats, like a clap of loyal thunder.

"Die for her," I cried.

"Take him comrades, by the hand,
Blooded member of the band,"

cried the old man, gripping my hand.

Judith next grasped my rough fist, and then, one by one, the others filed past me and gave me the clasp of membership.

"Show him the secret of the cave," said the wizard. "And broach an anker in his honour?"

"May I show him, grand-dad?" asked Judith, prettily.

"Ay, lass," said the old man. "He fought in your honour; you may do that much for him."

She beckoned me to follow her out, and the men stood back to give us precedence, then came after us.

She took me to the back of the cottage where I thought the entrance had been,

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and, with a smile, bade Bill Prettyman and another to "Clear away."

In a trice what had seemed a wall of sand disappeared, and beneath was a slanting sail cloth, on which the sand had been heaped. This was raised, and behind it was the entrance door to the secret chamber. Simple enough, no doubt, but a hiding-place that one might seek for years without finding.

"But why did you not trust to the secret?" I asked. "Sure we need not have moved the bales and tubs, nor poor Tom Catchpole."

"Grand-dad knew there was treachery," said she, "and willed that the Lieutenant should see for himself. Moreover, when the screen is down 'tis bad air for a man within."

"Then your party came back last night?" I asked.

"Yes," said she.

"But how did they escape the revenue boats?" I asked. For it seemed to me that they must have passed the boats on their way home.

"'Twas so they discovered the traitor," said she. "He persuaded them that they

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might venture, thinking to lead them into a trap; but when they got to Burgh staithe, where the boats were moored, he whistled and struck flint and steel, thinking that the gaugers would be watching as they had undertaken, but they were fled up to the Manor House. So our lads rowed close in, and sank their boats, and so came home safe with the cargo. A rare trick."

"And the traitor—what of him?" I asked with a sinking of the heart, though I acknowledge that any punishment of such a man would be well merited.

"They have not told me," said she; "but he will not be seen again hereabouts."

A burst of laughter from the men made me think that the vengeance may not have been so tragic as death; but ere I could question further, the wizard's voice was heard, crying to me 'twas time to mount and get homewards.

"Fare ye well, master," came from a score throats. "Fare ye well. Be true to us, and you'll find us true men. 'Twill need but a word to the master here to bring us to you. Fare ye well."

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I called a good-bye and stepped to my horse, which still stood tethered to the sapling. Judith came with me, and ere I mounted I took occasion to whisper in her ear, while I held her hand in the clasp of parting, "Will ye take the half of the sixpence now, dear?"

She blushed, and her eyes glowed tender for a moment; but she shook her head.

"Nay, Will," said she, very soft. "'Tis early days yet. And—and you might marry brass. Nay, nay, I did not mean to hurt ye, Will. But there is much before all of us ere the time for such nonsense."

I had felt hurt at her speaking of brass after I had fought for her; ay, fought for her as well as if she had been made of money. But, after all, she spoke true; I had not done with Sir Hubert yet—that I knew full well. And, well, brass is a good thing.

"Farewell, then," said I.

"You are not angered," she asked, putting a hand upon my knee, for by this time I was a horseback.

"Angered, lass," I answered her; "why

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should I be angered? I but wished to bind my love to you, and you will none of it."

"I did not say that," she said. "Well, farewell."

But she looked saddened, and, in spite of the brass, my heart was very full of her. "Judith," I cried, "give me some favour which I may cherish. I fought for you in the lists. Sure I have earned the guerdon of my lady's favour."

"She took a small gold brooch from her neck, but I stayed her. "Nay," I said, "I'll have naught like brass from you. Give me the ribbon about your neck. You shall not say I put my pouch before my heart again."

At this she blushed and looked pleased. "I never said it, Will," said she, unknotting the ribbon; "but if you wish for the ribbon, 'tis yours."

"Then why not part a sixpence?" I cried.

"You are too greedy, sir," said she. "I am not to be won in twenty-four hours. Perhaps—but enough for the day is the happenings of it, and that will not be to-

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day. Now, good-bye; and, oh, Will, I thank you from my heart."

I pressed the ribbon to my lips, and saw her smile at me. Then I turned my horse's head, and with a shout to the old man, and another to his company, I rode off over the common.

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CHAPTER XI.

SIR HUBERT STRIKES.

I WAS in no mood for old Mother Durrant's scolding when I reached the farm. For what with lack of sleep in the night and a belly-full of fighting and pain in the day, I fell off the colt like a wounded man, and tottered into the great kitchen, thinking of one thing only—rest.

"Lor a massey," cried the old crone, "and where may you ha' been? Here was us all a waiting at the table ready for victuals, with a nice roast crop o' pork and a dish of baked fry and light dumplings, fit for a king. It went to my heart to see it cool, but I gave the master time, till the men's mouths watered so I feared for the cloth, and bade them fall to. Nice doings on a Sunday. Sir Hubert sent? Who's Sir Hu-

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bert to send for a freeholder of Fritton when he's squire o' Burgh? Never have I known your father keep the Sunday victuals waiting. How d'ye think I can take a pride in the cooking such ways?"

"Oh, mother," said I, "I must e'en lay me down for an hour. I'm sore wearied."

The old woman had been so busy looking at the seam of her apron that she had not raised her eyes to my face, but at the weariness of my voice she looked up.

"Lord sake!" cried she, "and whatever ha'e ye been doing to your face? Fighting? And o' Sunday? But come, my poor lad, let me bathe it and clump a bit o' beef on your eye. Truth! 'twill be as black as a Berkshire pig to-morrow. Fighting o' Sunday! But there! I doubt 'twas forced on ye; for I will say that ye were never one o' the quarrelsome sort."

I raised myself and made for the door, which led onto the narrow staircase to the upper parts of the house. "My face will do very well," said I; "but I should be glad of the beef."

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For there is naught like raw beef to draw the miscolour from a bruise.

"Get ye between the sheets," cried the old dame. "Sure, 'twill not be the first time I ha' bathed your hurts."

It pained me getting my clothes off, for my shoulder was feeling stiff. But I did not wish Granny Durrant to know of my wound. I could put her off aught else; but a knife wound is a serious thing to the mind of the country folk, though I would rather have one ten times than a good blow over the skull with a cudgel.

"Who ha' been a washin' and a dressin' of your face?" asked Mother Durrant, when she came up to my chamber, with a slab of steak in her hands. "'Twas well done, though I reckon the hussy that done it was what you fought about. Ah! if I had my way all the young trollops of the village should be kept in order by whip and stick. Ay, that Nell Catchpole is at the bottom of this, I'll bet a penny."

An idea came to me. I knew the strong

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loyalty of this old woman, and the shrewdness she had often showed.

"Nay, mother," said I, uncovering my wounded shoulder; "see, a knife did that. 'Twas no jolly turn up for a lass. That's Sir Hubert's work. We marsh folk are not used to bare steel in a fight, as well you should know."

"Sir Hubert! the devilish son of the devil," cried the old dame. "Wherever the whore o' Babylon sits amidst the Papists there will ye find blink o' knives an' sup o' poison; and he's Papist at heart, though he drink the Lord's blood in church, the treacherous villain; but I'll warrant ye gave as good as ye got."

"Ay," said I, "but with my fists. Now, granny, see here. No one must know of this beside yourself. No one must be suffered to come up to me here without my leave, unless it be Soft Fred, who has my permission to make some stay in the hay loft without being disturbed by entrance of anybody. Give him what food and drink he asks, let him come to me when he wills; but except for him and you, keep all out

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until you have told me who asks to enter. Ask not the meaning of this; you shall know all in time."

"Ay, lad," said she, "I'll obey ye in all things lawful. Have no care, all shall be done as ye say. Though why that innocent fool, Soft Fred—but there, I'll not worrit ye with my mardling. But shall I not see to the wound?"

I reassured her as to that. And on her having bound the meat to my eye, I bade her leave me, and soon I was fast in sleep.

I kept my bed till the Tuesday morn, having seen no one in the interim but Mother Durrant and Soft Fred. Fred told me that Tom Catchpole's hurts were healing, and that he might be about in less than a week. 'Twould be best for Mallard, the wizard, to make arrangements for shipping him abroad. But he seemed very loath to leave the country, and naught could be done with him in his present disposition. Fred took word down to the Bell Mound that I was doing well, and brought back tidings which caused me some anxiety. Strange men had, it seemed, been seen hiding in the gorse,

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and Judith feared they were hirelings of Sir Hubert. What their aim was none could tell. But all at the Mound were keeping close till fall of night, when the strangers invariably went off. Doubtless, the fame of the lights and night mysteries which the gaugers told of was sufficient to clear the neighbourhood of the Mound from all but the wizard and his people after fall of night. Judith bade me have no fear, but sent a word that I should distrust any advances from Sir Hubert.

I loved her message, for it showed she cared for me. But I regarded it little; for, I thought, when the first pain of defeat is over he will be friendly enough. Sure there are few men with blood so sour as to bear grudge for a bout at fisticuffs.

Soft Fred endeavoured to impress her warning on me, saying that Sir Hubert was not a man but a devil, and that his blood was foul and rotten with his own and his forbears' ill-living. But I bade him see to his charge in the loft; I was well enough able to look after myself.

I told Mother Durrant to spread it about

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the farm that I had sprained my ankle, and to give orders to my head man, Ted Fitch, to keep the men up to the mark. And, when I got me down to dinner on the Tuesday, I feigned to hobble, but told the diners that I thought to be sound shortly, for it was not so much as a sprain.

On the Wednesday morning I laughed, and sent word for Soft Fred to come to me.

A groom from Burgh Manor House had brought me a missive from his master, and I was glad to let Fred know that I had been right and he and Judith wrong.

"See here," said I, "I have a letter from Sir Hubert as friendly as may be."

"Read it out, master," said Fred; "ye know reading is beyond me."

So I read,—

"SIR,—If you can find it in your generosity to forget what passed between us on Sunday (which must ever be a source of infinite regret to me), I beg you will do me the honour to meet me at the Wednesday market to-day, and bury all ill-feeling in a stoup of Nelson's punch at the 'Wrestlers Inn.' I

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have to offer you my excuses that I am unable to call upon you myself, but the recent disturbances render my time not my own, and as the poaching affray takes me to Yarmouth on a day which I know generally sees you there, I hope that this explanation will suffice. Believe me, you hold a very high place in my esteem; and I cannot too forcibly express my regret that I should have been led into such unseemly conduct before you.

"I have the honour to be, Sir,
"Your most obedient humble servant,
"HUBERT DE BURGH, BART."

As soon as I was done, Fred gave a kind of snort. "Ye credit that?" he cried. "Well, they call me Soft Fred, and soft I may ape to be, but never so soft as to set foot within the jaws of that gin! Sure, master, you will see him d——d, ere you go to Yarmouth this day, unless you go well guarded, and watchful."

"Your suspicion is natural to you, Fred," said I, with some dignity; "but gentlemen understand these things better."

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He burst out into a neighing laugh. "Nay, master," said he, "were it a poor lad o' the marshes I should have no fear. When we've fout we're the better friends after; but this Sir Hubert, this polecat for treachery and lust, think ye he will forgive his downfall on the grass plot by the Mound, or the public shame of his foul play with the knife. Sure! he guesses that Miss Judith watched the fight. For, if he knows anything, he knows the ways of women; and where's the girl who wouldn't have spied out o' window to see how the battle went. Ah, yes, master, I'm sworn one o' the gang. They told me all; and more than ever Soft Fred will lay down his life for ye, for you never jeered at him because he feigned silliness, and ever gave him a good word and a bite or sup."

"Pooh!" I cried. "Saddle the blood colt for me. He makes a better show than good old Faithful."

"Well, ye must go your own way," said Fred. "But if ye go—" He stopped, and looked down with the silly expression which he could so well assume.

Then he looked up. "If ye must go,"

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said he, "take old Faithful. Your shoulder is barely healed over, and the blood colt may break the wound afresh."

That was good sense, and I took his advice. And further, as no time was named in Sir Hubert's letter, and it seemed early for punch in the morning, I did not ride to Yarmouth till after dinner, for I had naught to sell at market, and dared not yet use the highwayman's money to buy.

'Twas a dull, cloudy day, with falls of sleet, but no frost, and the sky was already lowering dark when I rode up the rise behind "Laughing Image Corner" to Fuller's Hill, and so on to the "Wrestlers." Wednesday's market is never so great or so long as that of Saturday, but it was the week before Christmas, and there is always a market for full three days busier than at any other time of the year. I put up my horse at the inn, and strolled on to the great plain before St. Nicholas' Church to see if Sir Hubert might be thereabout. Never had I seen a finer show of turkeys or geese; but my heart was sore to think that many of those plucked and dressed upon the stalls

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had come from the Mere Farm the week before, and that I had gambled away the price of them to the man whom I was now seeking. The jolly country folk filled the drinking houses and booths, and the scent of the celery, onions and garden stuff was fine. Wild ducks and geese hung up by the hundreds amidst slaughtered kine and sheep, rabbits, tame and wild, ducks and fowls, apples, pears and flat Norfolk biffens. Holly and mistletoe and winter flowers were there. The inns and wine shops had filled their windows with bottles and jars. The light went early, and when the oil flares lit up the stalls and all the great acreage of the market plain, I thought I had never seen the old town so gay and hearty. I wandered between the rows of stalls, passing a word here and a word there; and presently I noticed a body of men pushing about the crowded narrow ways between the rows of stalls as if the place belonged to them. When they came near I saw their blue shirts and tarry pigtails, and the gilt name on the front of their caps, *H.M.S. Ulysses*. Although the men were so boisterous and rough, they

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seemed to be a party in charge of some authority, for they went right or left as a red-faced bloated-looking man bade them. I knew not why, but I felt a strange alarm at sight of these men. No town in England better loved the King's ships, and him who ruled them all, the great and noble Nelson. Nor was I behind in admiration and affection for the Norfolk hero. Never had I looked askance at the blue uniform before; nor could I tell why it struck me unpleasantly now.

I slipped between two stalls and looked at the party passing in the way I had just quitted, and, as I stood watching them shoving their mass along, with rough horse play and free banter for both men and women, a pair of faces from behind the stalls on the further side of the bluejackets shone for an instant in the light of an oil flare which the keeper of a stall lifted down from its place to show more clearly what some purchaser desired to see.

The faces drew back into shadow as soon as the light fell upon them, but not before I knew one of them as belonging to Sir

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Hubert. The other I knew not, but, so far as the momentary sight could vouch, I took it for that of a naval officer.

At the time I thought nothing of the matter. There was no reason why Sir Hubert should not be talking to a naval or any other kind of officer, and I walked on to the end of my row, round the next, and into that which, I thought, held the man who had invited my company at the market that day.

It was not long before I met him, but he was alone; nor did he mention that he had been with a companion.

"Nay, Will," said he, holding out his hand. "That's hearty. I knew you would not bear enmity. How it happed I cannot conceive; but the beauty of the girl must have made me mad for the time. But you have my letter, and I have your pardon. Is it not so?"

There was little heart in my return of his grip of my hand. Though I acquitted him of all intent of fresh treachery, as was suspected by Fred, the thought of his brutality to Judith, and his use of the

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knife in the fight, choked the words upon my lips.

He took me by the arm, and steered for "The Wrestlers." "I've ordered the bowl," said he; "there's great call for Nelson's punch to-day, a seventy-four is in the roads, and the whole town is rollicking with officers and crew. A merry day for our reconciliation, Will, a merry and auspicious."

He laughed as he spoke; but I took his merriment for mere light-heartedness. How was I to know then that the man was never light-hearted for sheer joy of life; only some rascal treachery, some villainous trick, could rouse his laughter. But, for all that, 'twas gladsome enough to hearken to, and I laughed in company with him.

He guided me to a private room, where a good fire of sea coal was burning and a great china bowl stood upon the table, ready for the brew, which Nelson's self had approved when he had made merry at this very house on his return from the battle of the Nile.

Presently Mrs. Suckling herself brought

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in the reeking punch. 'Twas she who asked Nelson if she might name "The Wrestlers" "The Nelson Arms," in honour of his visit. Upon which he gaily answered, "That'll never do. Why, I've only got one!"

Sir Hubert ladled out the punch, and we pledged each other, honestly enough so far as I was concerned, for so long as the man left me and Judith alone I had no wish for enmity with him.

"Here's to our friendship," was his third toast (after we had drunk to King George and to Nelson). Toast after toast followed, and though the bowl was deep we began to see the pattern on the bottom of the porcelain. I felt as jolly as needs be, and sure Sir Hubert showed every sign of conviviality.

"Another bowl," I cried, when we drained the first. But Sir Hubert said that he had business that night, and would not venture.

"Well," said I, "perhaps 'tis wise. Already the candles here have a curious rainy halo, and, moreover, there's my——"

Gad! I pulled up quick, for I was about to say "My wound."

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"Ah," says he, "I suppose you are to meet her in Middlegate Street?"

"Meet whom?" I cried, suddenly as sober as a judge.

"Why the fair damsel whom you defended so valiantly from me o' Sunday," he laughed. "Sure you knew she was in Yarmouth."

"Of course; of course," I cried. (Though God knew I had no notion of it.)

"At the bow-windowed house first past the Toll House," said he. "Aha! lucky fellow!"

I knew no more than Adam what house he meant, but I had no mind to let him guess that I was unaware of the girl's being in the town or where she was.

"Ay," said I. "And, to speak truth, I feared I have overstayed my time already. I thank you for calling the matter to my memory."

"Well, farewell," said he. "Friends when when next we meet, eh?"

"That's for time to show," said I, for I liked not his mention of Judith.

I hastened out of the inn, intending to

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return for my horse after I had been to the house with the bow windows in Middlegate Street. I went down Broad Row, and turned to the left in George Street, and so came out upon the South Quay. There was some cluster of folk about the quay, and I heard one or two voices lifted as it seemed in anger. But I was too intent upon my mission to stay to hearken to what was amiss. I ran across the quay and changed to a fast walk as soon as I got into Middlegate Street. The street was dark and ill-lit, and I could see but a short distance ahead. I had passed the third row leading to the harbour on the right when I heard a shout, and, in an instant, I found myself in the midst of the body of sailors whom I had observed in the market, and the face of their officer was the face which I had seen beside that of Sir Hubert.

"Come, my man," said the officer, "we have need of you for His Majesty's service. Will you come aboard ship quiet? Will ye volunteer, or will ye act like a mutinous dog, and go aboard in irons?"

"You have no right," I began.

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"But we have you," said the officer, with a chuckle.

"I tell you I'm a freeholder of standing," I cried.

"Well, you shall have the freemanship of the sea," cried he. "Come, do ye volunteer?"

"Ah!" I cried, "'tis Sir Hubert I have to thank for this."

And at this I heard one of the men give a laugh, as if he knew I had spoke truth. It was the bloated ruffian who had seemed to be in command in the market.

"No matter whether 'twas the devil," cried the officer. "Here you are and here are we. We've got you, and the King himself couldn't release you without an order from the Admiralty. Now, once again, will you volunteer?"

I thought that if once I were shackled all chance of escape was over.

"Yes," said I, "I volunteer." But I did not say for what.

"That's right," cried he. "Then come along to the jetty. All aboard, men."

And I knew that the story of Judith in

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Middlegate Street was false. But that was little encouragement to me. This time Sir Hubert had got the better of me. And Judith! Had the villain designs on her? If so, God and her grand-dad's art keep her in charge, for I, who loved her, was pressed.

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CHAPTER XII.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

THEY placed me in the midst of their party, and I saw that there were five other poor wretches whom these legalised kidnappers had pressed. Three of these were in shackles, the other two were free as I was. That is, morally as securely fettered as though we, too, wore gyves. The superior officer (whom I guessed to be the third lieutenant of the ship) gave the word to advance, and, with their prisoners guarded by the detachment of ten men, the party took us in the direction of St. George's Paved Row. But before we got to the turning, the bloated faced warrant officer (for such I took him to be) went up to the lieutenant, and, with a pull at his forelock, said, "I ask your pardon, sir, but now we've got the half

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dozen, may we have a wet afore we goes aboard ? "

" Ay, quarter-master," said the lieutenant ; " and for once I'll stand treat. 'Tis a good night's haul."

I saw the art with which I had been entrapped. Had I alone been pressed, the proceeding would have appeared too invidious if ever the matter came to be sifted. As it was, even if I succeeded in obtaining my release from the Admiralty, it could easily be made to assume the character of an accident. But now that the first shock of my capture was over, and had dissipated some of the fumes of the punch which still clung about me, I decided to make my position clear to the officer, so that he should have no excuse for saying he did not know whom he had pressed.

" I beg your pardon, sir," said I, " but I warn you you have illegally impressed me. I am a freeholder of Fritton, and a man of some position. The mayor here would identify me, and my attorney would place any reasonable bail in your hands pending investigations. I beg you——"

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"Shut his mouth, one of you," cried the lieutenant. And the man on my right smote me across the mouth. But I saw that their design was to make me attempt violence, and so have some cover for the villainy. So I swallowed the blow, and, judging that either the lieutenant had been too well paid, or that Sir Hubert had too great a hold upon him, to make it possible for him to listen to me, I walked on in silence.

"Here's the 'Three Herrings,'" cried the quarter-master. "You can get as good a drop of Nelson's Blood* there as anywhere in Yarmouth."

The men swung the door of the inn wide, and, still keeping us closely guarded, entered. The rum was scarce served, when I saw a tall, lean, bent figure, which I recognised, come shambling through the doorway.

It was Soft Fred, though how he got there the Lord alone knew.

"If it please, your honour," said Fred, with a silly laugh, "won't ye give a poor silly boy a drop of comfort? Sure, the wet

* Rum.

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and the cold ha' got into my bones. He! He! He! And you look a kind-hearted gentleman."

Now if there was a more villainous countenance among us than the quarter-master's it was the lieutenant's. The stumpy, snub-nosed, pimply, ginger-haired man must have risen through the hawse hole, for gentlemen never wore face or form like his.

He leered brutally at the ridiculous appearance the feigning idiot made.

"Do ye come out of a caravan?" he asked. "You're worth a penny to see, you ugly idiot."

"Then sure the lot of ye can buy me sixpenn'orth o' rum," said Fred; "and I'll dance for ye. Oh! I'll dance for ye like a fairy."

"God's death," cried the officer, "I'd like to see ye. Here, my man, what did ye say was your name?"

"I'm Soft Fred, an' it please ye," said Fred, giggling inanely. "I'm silly, I am. Poor Soft Fred they call me."

"D——y your bones look hard enough," said the lieutenant, laughing at his own

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joke. "But you shall have a tot. Landlord, give him a glass of rum."

Fred thanked him, and drank. "And are ye taking these wicked men to the lock-up?" he asked. "What have they done? I'm that afeared o' murderers. Don't let 'em touch me, will ye, admiral, dear?"

The fool of a navy man preened his dingy feathers at the title. "Aha!" he cried, "truth out of the mouth of a fool, eh? Well, there's many a man flies his flag who hasn't seen so much service as poor Jack Phillips. But don't be alarmed, my poor fellow, these men will be gallant sailors in a day or two. Ha! Ha! See how happy they look agoing aboard our ship!"

For a moment I caught Fred's eye, and it told me that he had a scheme to help me. While on the marshes with him we had made up a number of signals wherewith to speak to each other when at too great distance for hearing. I saw him swing his hand, and knew that he meant to attempt to signal.

As soon as he had drained his glass, he said, with a clumsy leap, "And shall Soft

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Fred dance for ye now, your honour? He! He! Don't say no, if you'd rather not."

The man-o'-war's men had not been content with one glass each, and were now well into their third, which, together with the drink they had taken previously, began to have some effect upon them, seasoned rum soakers as they were.

Phillips roared with laughter. "Stand back, my men," cried he. "Have an eye on the new hands, but give him space for his dance. Gad! the man is as good as a play. Don't say no, if you'd rather not. Ha! ha!"

A space was cleared in the middle of the bar, and Fred began to leap about and to fling his arms and hands in every direction. But I soon saw that every gesture was a signal, and, while the eyes of my captors were fixed on his uncouth performance, I made shift to answer his signals to the best of my ability. The sign conversation ran somewhat as follows:—

Fred.—"Can ye swim?"

Myself.—"Yes."

Fred.—"Will your shoulder stay ye?"

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Myself.—"Not for a short swim."

Fred.—"When ye can after three hours jump and swim for the South Light."

Myself.—"Yes."

Immediately after he had read my answer to his last question, Fred took occasion to stumble over a settle and fall heavily on the floor. He burst into tears, amidst the roars of laughter of the seamen, and, getting up, he turned to the door, and cried, sobbing, "An' I had thought ye would have played a poor boy a trick like that I'd never ha' danced to ye. For shame. My granny always said pity the afflicted. Boo-hoo, boo-hoo."

And, while the bar still shook with laughter, he went out into the night.

"Come, my men," cried Phillips. "Time's running. We must get aboard."

Out we went, and, at a brisk pace, in spite of the unsteadiness of many of the guard, we were speedily come to the sand and marram of the shore. Out in the roads the lights of the great ship were twinkling, in the midst of a hundred others of coasting craft which were laid to in the roads.

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"(Hic)—There she lays," hiccoughed Phillips. "There lays your future home, my beauties."

At this a young fellow beside me, dressed as a fisherman, gave a moaning cry, and in a trice struck down the guard beside him with the shackles on his wrists, and made a burst for freedom. But the poor lad had no chance. Drunk as they were the seamen were too used to that condition to be unable to catch a man handicapped with the loss of balance of free arms.

"D—— him," cried Phillips. "Cut him down for a lesson." And to my horror one of the pigtails drew his cutlass, and, with an oath, slashed at the flying man. The blow took him on the side of his head and sliced off an ear, bringing him to the ground with a yell of pain and misery.

"You mutinous dog!" cried Phillips. "Soon as the doctor gives permission you shall be triced up for that, sure as my name's Phillips. Come on, men. There goes a rocket. I knew we should be late."

Indeed, as he spoke, a rocket flared up in the dark, and the party broke into a run,

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someone of them holding each of us prisoners and hauling him along.

As we came to the jetty a man yelled out, "Boat ahoy; here they come."

I knew the voice, and as we passed under the oil flare at the landward end of the jetty I saw that it was old Bill Prettyman, and my heart rose high. For I guessed Fred was not alone in his venture.

The old man ran down the jetty with us, and offered much civility to the seamen, so that Phillips said, "D——, if you wasn't such an old cock we'd take ye aboard with us."

"Nothing I'd like better, your honour," said Billy, "but my time's over for that. Aha! you've got some beef and bone there!" he cried, pointing to me. "That's the sort for His Majesty's navy, God bless him. That's the sort for Nelson."

He ran down the steps and steadied some of the pigtails into the boat, and, indeed, they wanted it, for though they could keep up a rolling walk or run ashore on the level, the steps tried them hard.

Phillips himself would have slipped but

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for the old man's arm. He put something into his palm, and the old fellow's hand went up to his forelock in true sailor fashion.

"Ready, oars," cried the cox'n astern. "Give way."

The last thing I saw ashore, barring the lights, was old Bill Prettyman.

The ship lay out about a mile, but the passage took long enough for three, for the men made worse work of rowing than they had done of running. But at length we drew alongside, and were passed up the steps (I am no sailor and know not the correct term for the ladder which hung at the side) to the deck. The lieutenant made his report, and we were sent below, to be placed on the ship's books on the morrow. The captain seemed pleased by what I could hear of it, and took no notice of the condition of some of the press gang.

Now it seemed to me that it would never do to be taken to the men's quarters below. Once there it would be hard to find an opportunity to get on deck without being suspected. I trusted to the drunkenness of the men who had brought us off not to be

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too particular as to our number after they had once got us aboard. And, instead of going down the ladder or companion, or whatever it is called, I contrived to slip behind a kind of deck-house, which I guessed was the cook's galley. As the ship was in the roads perhaps as careful a watch was not kept as would otherwise have been the case, although I had heard ashore many tales of the desertion of men from men-o'-war laying off the town. However it fell about does not matter to me or to you, reader, but all I know is that I hid myself behind some dark mass which lay on deck and felt like sail cloth, and tucked myself into it, scarce daring to breathe.

The ship was to sail in the morning, and all were now aboard. Soon there was no one on deck but the look-out and the officer of the watch.

For the first hour or so one or other of the men on deck passed and repassed me with some frequency. I did not see a red coat, so guessed that there were no marines aboard. That was in my favour, for with a marine or two keeping sentry-go all night

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my chance would have been small. It may be that the ship was not famed for its discipline. Indeed, all the best of the ships and men were at sea with Nelson; and I learnt afterwards that the *Ulysses* had the repute of being a sloven.

I had my watch in my pouch, for the rascals who kidnapped me had not robbed me as yet, but there was no light to see the time, and I dare not strike flint on steel, for that would have at once betrayed me. The hauling about I had gone through had made my wounded shoulder ache more than was comfortable, and I did not look forward to putting it to the test of a swim. Fortunately the night was calm. But, oh! how cold the water would be! I solaced myself by thinking it could not be colder than the water of the run into which I had plunged on the night of the adventure at the Bell Mound. But it was poor comfort. I dared not even raise my head to look at the light at the pier head, which was to be my direction. Overhead there was a heavy, dull sky, with no shine of moon or star. It was the one thing which was really satisfactory.

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At length the look-out or watch, or whatever he was, who kept tramping past, settled down somewhere in the fore part of the ship. And then a bell struck four. Why that number of strokes of the bell should have put sense into my head I know not. All I can say is that I had heard the half-hour bell regularly before, but never thought to remember that there was the time being knelled at me as if for my very own convenience. How I thanked the stars that I had once taken the trouble to learn the bells and watches from an old sailor. Four bells in the last watch. Why that was ten o'clock; I had but half an hour to wait. Never did thirty minutes pass so slowly, I thought the watch must have gone to sleep and forgotten five bells! I itched with worry and anxiety. How if I were late, and Fred had despaired and given me up. For I doubted not that he would meet me in a boat, and that I should find him in the line of direction of the South Pier Light.

The tide was at the flood, and we were swinging with our head to the north. I was on the larboard side, and thus nearest

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to the shore. How long, oh Lord! how long!

Then, when I thought it must be close on midnight, "Cli-clang, cli-clang, clang." Five bells. Half-past ten. Good Lord, watch over me.

There was no sound of foot on deck. I slipped off my boots and coat, emptying my pockets into my breeches pockets. I peeped up over the heap against which I lay. No one was in sight. It was so pitch dark that but for the ship's lights nothing could be seen aboard at a greater distance than two feet.

I crept on all fours to the bulwarks, praying that the ladder might still be down; but, of course, it was not. All was snug for the night. It meant a splash, for I dared not slip in too close to the drift of the tide beneath the keel or 'twas any odds but I should be sucked under.

I slid over the bulwarks, and held on, scarce breathing. There was no sound to show that I had been seen. I found myself on some iron projections, and by means of them crept along to what I have learnt

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since were the fore chains. Still more forward I crept, and then I came to the stay beneath the bowsprit. I lowered myself down on this, and, bending over the sea, I kicked off into the tide as strong as I could. There was but a little splash, and I found myself swimming for the light ahead, with a strong flood under me, which in the middle of the roads runs very swift. Would Fred have taken that into calculation? Or, if not he, would old Bill Prettyman, who had run many a cargo off the coast, and who should know every current and drift of tide?

Good God! if they forgot I should drift to the south'ard, past the pier heads. I pointed my course a bit more for the shore, so that the sweep of my swim might take me as straight for the light as I could make it.

My heart was beating thick and fast, and my shoulder was beginning to pain me, so that I got on to my back and kicked myself along, resting my arms. The icy water bit into my very bones.

But scarcely had I taken fifty strokes on my back when I heard a whisper ahead.

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I turned on to my breast, and there was a boat right on to me. As I swept on, it sheered off to bring me on its larboard side, and a pair of hands reached over and grabbed me, just as a great numbness was stealing over me.

"Thank God, sir, we've got ye," said old Bill Prettyman's voice.

He heaved, and another pair of hands caught me. Another heave, and I was inboard, dripping on the floor boards and near weeping for joy.

"Here I be, master," came Fred's voice in a whisper. "Wrop them coverings about ye and sup at old Bill's bottle. You'll be as right as a trivet. Ha! ha! we've done 'em proper."

The boat swung round. I saw it was a six-oared gig; and, before the rum had warmed me, we were rowing with muffled oars, very quiet, towards the harbour at Gorleston.

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CHAPTER XIII.

TOM CATCHPOLE DISAPPEARS.

PERFECT silence was now maintained in the boat until the six sturdy oars swept her round the point of the South Pier of Gorleston Harbour into the mouth of the river. Here the sound of our voices, which the surface of the sea might have carried to the man-o'-war, was checked by the intervening pier, and we could talk with safety.

"We're agoing to row ye right up to the Mound, master," said Fred. "The whole beach is watched for deserters, but we can get on to Breydon safe enow, and then 'twill be all plain going."

The warm coverings which the men had thoughtfully provided for me had by this time sent the blood coursing hot through my veins. The smuggled Jamaica from old

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Bill's bottle had also done its part, and I was as warm as toast, and only a bit sleepy, as one is apt to be when a glowing comfort follows on the chill of exposure.

"But all this is a mystery to me," said I. "However did you manage to be on the spot so handily, Fred?"

"Well, ye see, master," said Fred; "when ye read out that there letter I reckoned as there was a some'at wrong. So I locked up Tom in the loft, and runned down to see Miss Judith as quick as I could.

"She went in and saw the old master; and she worn't long afore she come out and give orders that me and six of the tothers on us should take the ebb down to Yarmouth and keep an eye on ye. We laid the boat up above the bridge, and all on us scattered to get a sight on ye. I went to the 'Wrestlers,' and see your hoss there, and I larnt as you was inside along o' that warmin o' Burgh Manor. I see ye come out, and I followed ye down to Middlegate Street and watched when they took ye. Soon as I left the 'Three Herrings,' arter I'd told ye what to do, I hunted up the

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men, and here we are with ye, all right and tight. And now that's for you to say what's to be done."

I thanked him—thanked them all; but I could find no words to sufficiently express the deep sense of gratitude which their fidelity and shrewdness deserved. And, in the midst of all my sincere appreciation of the rough kindness of these men, the thought came sweet to me that it had been Judith's care to which I owed my escape. Ah! she thought of me, then, as faithfully as I thought of her!

"I don't think you can do better than as you suggest," said I. "Row me to the Mound, and I can make my way home across the common."

"Would ye go home, master?" asked Fred. "How'd it do to let Sir Hubert think ye still aboard the ship?"

"Oh," said I; "then you, too, think Sir Hubert had something to do with my impressment."

"Think?" laughed Fred. "Why, bor, I'm sure on't. Old Billy Prettyman got into talk with some o' the Jacks, and heard 'em

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speak of an arranged job, and Jack Norris here saw the warmin a yarning along o' the orficer."

"That settles it, then," said I, though I had no doubt, before this confirmation, of the truth of my suspicions.

But I saw no advantage in hiding myself. It was pretty sure that the Lieutenant would have an opportunity of sending a note ashore to warn Sir Hubert of my escape, though that might not be till morning. Moreover, now that I was safe ashore, soon to be in my own village, no press gang would dare to touch me. Sir Hubert would doubtless try some other villainy; but if I returned home openly, his attempt must be open. Whereas if I secreted myself, and let it be thought that I had left the village, he might discover my whereabouts, and be able to get rid of me without the risk which would necessarily be run in putting me out of the way after I was known to have got home.

"I don't think it's any use keeping dark, Fred," said I; "and it may be inconvenient. We don't know what his game is, and I

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must be out and about to keep a watch on him. Then there is Tom Catchpole, and the contraband. If I were not at home Ted Fitch might want to see into the hay loft and corn barn, and get to know more than we want him to know."

A chorus of approval came from the crew of the boat. We were going up harbour fast on the strong flood, and, as we drew near the inns and houses facing the South Quay we kept silence again, for it was of no use to court observation.

One thing began to trouble me. This was no light service which these men had done for me. How much would it cost? I could not offer them a mere drink each; and there were so many of them. If I gave them a sovereign a piece it would come to seven pounds—a tidy lump of brass!

But I decided to leave that matter till I was landed, then I could try half a sovereign on Fred first. If he seemed to think it enough, I should not give more to the others. I always like to do right by folk, but I don't believe in flinging brass away. I could make it up to them otherwise well enough.

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We went over Breydon behind a fleet of keel boats, but they had a fair wind, and the tide caught them even more than it did our shallow craft, so that by the time we were at the head of Breydon, and heading to larboard over Burgh Flats, they were well on their way up the old river towards Norwich. Except for them and one or two fowlers' punts (who one and all hailed us and asked if we had any stuff aboard, for they were all hand in hand with the smugglers) we did not meet or pass a craft on the waters. Now and then the great boom of a punt gun roared out, and set the wings whistling over the marshes. The night was full of noises of the fowl, but the darkness stayed us from hearing many shots, for the gunners could not get within sighting distance to let go.

The flood held well; and it was not long before we could see the light at the top of the Bell Mound, which told us all was well at headquarters. They pulled up at the staithe opposite the Mound, and I leapt ashore, Fred coming next, and old Bill Prettyman after him,

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"Now, my lads," said I, "I owe you more than I can ever pay ye over this job; but if you'll drink my health, here's a——"

Fred sniggered, and put my hand away.

"You're making a mistake," said he.

But old Bill drew himself up a bit, and came close to me, looking me square in the eyes. "Master," said he, "I thought you were one of us. Put your brass away, and be d——d to it. We free traders of the marshes are no grooms or lackeys. Nay, I doubt but there's one of us, at least, who could show ye gold for gold, and then have a heap left. But you're young, and you mean right; only don't let them others know ye offered us brass. 'Tis like the upland folk to think brass is everything; ay, and like the marshmen, too. But us free-traders are free men, and scorn the likes of pay for duty. Forgive me if I speak too free, lad; but I loved your father, and would not take aught from his son but the clasp of his hand."

I gripped the honest old fellow's fist; and I am not ashamed to say that I felt easier at learning their feelings.

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Scarce had we got off the rand, or wet fen, when Judith came running to us.

"Ah, Will," she cried, "so they've brought ye safe. Thank God. Grand-dad showed me that you were pressed, and that our friends picked ye up from the sea. Oh I'm so glad Fred thought to come to us. 'Twas fortunate you gave me Sir Hubert's stilet, for by means of that grand-dad read his intent, and planned according."

"Now," thought I, "devil take me if I understand a word of what she says. How her grand-dad can have shown me to her afloat or ashore, or what on earth the stilet had to do with the matter, is more than I can say."

But I gave no vent to my wonder, I only took the girl's hand and kissed it; and was about to take her in my arms, when she repulsed me.

"No, Will," said she, "the time grows nearer, but it is not yet. You have to be proved worthy yet, and I know you will be."

"Proved worthy, egad!" I cried. "That's

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the tale you told before. Hang me if I can make head or tail of it."

"Nay," said she, "let us not bicker at this time; take heed of my words. There's more trouble coming, and trouble in which you will have another chance to show your mettle. Away home with ye at your best speed. Stay not now to say farewell; but let Fred go with ye."

"But ought I not to see your grand-dad and thank him?" I asked.

"He knows all you would say," said she, with a smile. "Silly boy, when will you understand us?"

"Never, I fear," I cried. "But, Judith, will ye not give me just one kiss before I go?"

"Not one," said she. "'Tis no time for kisses. Haste, and prepare for what comes."

I tried to catch her to me, but she slipped away, laughing, and again bade me haste.

So I shouted out a good-bye to the crew who had saved me, and who were heave-hoing somewhere in the dark, whereby I gathered they were hauling up the boat to some secluded spot.

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"Fare ye well, missy," said Fred.

Judith turned once, and looked, not at me, but at Fred.

"Remember," said she, and that was all.

Before we had got far across the common I was glad of Fred's company, for my wound ached sorely, and all the bones of my body were heavy and chill with weariness. He supported me with his forearm beneath my armpit, and half helped, half lifted me over the worst places.

All lights were out at the Mere Farmhouse, as was natural enough, seeing that on winter nights the household sought their beds not much after eight; and before I went in I accompanied Fred up to the loft to see how Tom Catchpole fared. I doubted that Sir Hubert would soon take occasion to come about the farm, and I should be glad to be rid of the surly fellow who had shed blood fatally on the Lowestoft sands.

Fred undid the door, and I struck a spark into my tinder box and lit the lantern which stood behind the door.

We wondered somewhat that Tom had not hailed us on our entry. Perhaps he

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had feared the coming of strangers, and hid himself in his chamber in the hollowed space in the midst of the hay trusses. The lantern glowed in the loft, and sure enough he was not to be seen outside.

Fred went to the wall of trusses and spoke into them. "Come out, Tom," said he; "it's only Master Will and me."

But there was no response, nor was there any sound of a man's breathing in sleep.

"Hold the lantern here, master," cried Fred. And there was anxiety in the sound of his voice.

I did as he asked, and be began to tear away the wall of trusses till he exposed the hiding place he had made for the wounded man. It was empty.

"See here," said Fred. He pointed to where a loose board in the flooring had been raised, leaving space enow for the passage of a man into the sheds below.

"He's gone away of his own accord," said Fred. "Now what the devil does he mean by that? He was scarce fit to go, though he was mending fast. What does it mean?"

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"I neither know nor care," yawned I. "We'll talk of this to-morrow, Fred. To-night I am half dead for sleep."

And with that I left him, and made my way as quietly as I could to my bed chamber, where I undressed, got between the sheets, and slept like a hog.

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CHAPTER XIV.

THE HIGHWAYMAN'S PARTHIAN SHOT.

WHEN I woke it was late for a farmer to commence the day's work. But the daylight had scarce begun to glimmer on the surface of the Mere, as I could see from my window. I went down and found Mother Durrant preparing breakfast. The men had been at work for hours, and their dew snack was forgotten by this time.

"Nice times for a farmer ta git out o' bed," grumbled the old woman. "Your father was always booted and out o' doors afore six winter time, and afore half arter four summer time. However you expect to thrive passes me; but there! there's no judging of the young folks, they know such a deal more than them as nussed 'em when they was babbies. And now, what

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d'ye think's wrong? O' course if ye lay abed all day you can't be expected to know nothing in time to be of any use. The roof might tumble in, and the cows all die o' the gripes, and you'd never turn in your bed. Deary, deary me! to think as Mere Farm should ever get into the hands o' such a bed slug! What would the old master ha' said?"

I'd had enough of this, so I onned wi' my boots, and made for the doorway.

"Lor there," cried Mother Durrant, "don't you pay no regard to an old woman! Set ye down and put a someat in you afore ye go outside. Why, o' course you can lay abed, and would be silly not to with that bad shoulder and all. Never you mind an old woman's mobbing. Set ye down, I'll get ye a mug o' home brewed, and a smoked herring afore ye go out."

"Well, mother," said I, "I can do with something. But what's wrong?"

"Why, 'tis like this," said she, "that good-for-nowt Ben Hallam must needs leave his plough and go to Yarmouth yesterday market, and he never come back; and there's

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tellings as he's got hisself into trouble there."

I swore right out. As if the fool must needs bring the notice of the law on the farm when there was all that contraband in the barn! I rose to my feet, and in spite of the old woman's entreaties that I should stay and take my snack I ran out into the stack yard, and, seeing no one about, I opened the door of the barn.

I cried out in surprise, for not a bale, not an anker, or a roll of tobacco lay where I had stored it.

I stood there, on the floor of the great barn, and the sweat poured off me. Had Tom Catchpole made off with the lot? No, 'twas impossible. How, then——

Even as I stood in wonder and tribulation a step sounded behind me, and I turned swiftly to meet the intruder.

"It's all right, master," said Fred. "They come up from the Mound last night and took every drop, stitch and pipeful away in a waggon wi' rope bound on the wheels to dull the sound. Bill Prettyman give me a letter for ye from Miss Judith, but said as

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I wasn't to disturb ye if you was asleep. You mind she bade me 'remember,' but she had no will to trouble you more last night."

He handed me a folded sheet of paper, and, in the dim grey light, which was now spreading over the land, I read the letter.

"News have come which render it unsafe for you to have the stuff in hiding. The way is clear to-night, and the men will bring it down by wain and store it elsewhere. Be on your guard. Expect Sir Hubert with a search warrant."

"Well, that's a nice thing!" I cried. "What danger there is I know not; but after all my work the other night I think they ought to have let me know before they took away the goods which were the only security that I should see good brass for my trouble. However, since 'tis Judith's will, I can say naught."

Soft Fred laughed. "Brass, brass, brass," he said. "Lord, what a deal folk think o' brass! What good do it do ye? Look at me, I hain't no brass, but I have what I want to eat and drink, and a coat and

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breeches to cover me, a gun, and a rod and line, and plenty of powder and shot, and hooks. What do a man want more, master? Ha' done wi' your brass. Mind ye not that little missy is not to be won by brass, but by a man's good pluck and strength."

It's easy enough for a landless and moneyless man to talk as if he thought naught of brass. Likely enough after I had lost my five hundred to Sir Hubert, and before I found my lucky bags on the highwayman I might have spoken in despite of brass; but the thought of the thousand locked up in the secret hiding place warmed my heart to gold.

"Well, what's done can't be helped," said I. "And, after all, they may have saved us a deal of trouble, if 'tis as Mother Durrant tells me, and Ben Hallam has got into trouble with the law. But how did they get into the barn?" I asked.

"The key o' the loft which ye gave me fit the barn," said Fred. "They'd ha' had to rouse ye up else."

"All right," said I. And now that I knew both Tom Catchpole and the contraband

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were off my premises I went in to eat a bit with a lighter heart.

After breakfast it was all over the village that Ben had tried to pass a note which had been stolen from an overmarsh farmer by the highwayman, on the night when I knocked him off his horse and relieved him of the money bags. The farmer had kept the numbers of the notes of which he had been robbed, and Ben was trapped like a snipe in a horse hair nooze.

Ben was my best ploughman, a man of forty-eight, with a wife and five children. He was a good worker as a rule, but a bit too fond of keeping about late o' nights snaring rabbits on the common. His cottage was on my land, and his family had been in the employ of mine for two hundred years. I had ever found him honest, and, at any rate, knew well enough that he was not the night rider whom I had settled. The highwayman was taller by six inches, and had not Ben's great breadth of shoulder, or heavy arms. Moreover, the idea that poor ploughman Ben should ever have gone

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a riding was ridiculous. He had neither nag nor fitting clothes.

How, then, did the note come into his possession? I knew well enough that he would have no note of his own. Whatever savings our labouring men get together they keep in good hard coin. Had he done the night rider a service and been rewarded by one of the stolen notes? Possibly he had been out on the common that night, and been bribed to say naught of the figure on horseback waiting for what might come to him along the high road. Or—had he found the dead body of the man and rifled it? Had my blows been fatal, then? The man had seemed lifeless, but I had not thought the blow so shrewd. It might be the fall upon his head had done his business. Whichever way it happed it was bound to cause trouble to the farm. Sir Hubert would make the most of his chance to annoy me. What had Ben said? By gad! I'd have given a pound to know the tale he had fobbed off on the constables.

I was sitting in the kitchen a thinking what was best to do, when a Lound man, Dick Hornet, slouched up to the door.

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"Be ye there, Master Buddery?" he asked.

I was in no mood to listen to village babble, or Dick's usual tale of distress. But I said, "Well, what is it, Dick, more trouble?"

"Should I come in, master?" asked Dick.

"Oh, yes," I cried; "come in and be quick to get your business done."

The man entered and seated himself, without waiting for an invitation.

"He! he!" said he, "I see ye last Saturday night."

"Saw me," cried I, my veins swelling and my blood flowing. "Well, I suppose you're not the only one to see me."

"Ehe!" he said, wiping the back of his right hand across his mouth. "Did ye mark a chap who louped over the run ahind your boats? That was me. I see ye, and what ye had in the boats, right enow."

I remembered the figure I had seen upon the banks of the run after the three shots and the shouting upon the bank, and the sound which I had thought was the swinging across on a bough of the tree which had knocked me overboard. Damnation! then

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we had been seen. But, aha! he dared say naught of us, for I knew a keeper had been murdered at the place he was flying from when he came out upon the edge of the run.

"Well," said I, "what then?"

"If I was to puff where your load is," said he, "I reckon that's in the barn—he! he! That ought to be worth a something to me. If I was to puff, d'ye know what they'd do to ye?"

I put my head out of the door. "Fred," I called, "I want you."

"What d'ye want Fred for?" said the man.

"Come in, Fred," said I. "You remember we saw a man behind us in the run on Saturday night?"

"Yes," said Fred.

"And he was flying from the murder he had just committed," I asked.

"So we heered next day," said Fred.

"This is the man," I said, throwing myself upon him. "There's a price upon his head."

Fred took him on the other side, and presently we had him safe bound and calm as a lamb.

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"You're sure you were the man who saw us?" I asked.

"I never see ye," grunted Dick. "I didn't mean nothing."

"Because," said I, "there's nothing in my barn, and you are welcome to 'puff' as much as you like. But I'll do a bit then, and you will wear a pretty hempen necktie in Norwich Castle, as sure as you're Dick Hornet."

'Let me go, master," cried the man. "I didn't mean nothing."

"You make a mistake in thinking you saw us, then?" I asked.

"I never see ye," he repeated. "Let me go, master."

"You hear him, Fred," said I, unbinding the man. "Now kick him out of the yard."

Fred did my bidding with a will, and Dick ran out into the road yelling and begging for mercy. We had effectually scotched that snake; but there was a more formidable one to come.

He had hardly made his way round the corner of the road against the "Jolly Anglers," when there was a clatter of horses'

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hoofs and a clink of their trappings on the round flints in the yard.

"Is Master Buddery within?" cried Sir Hubert's voice. "I have here a search warrant which I have signed for the dwelling or residence of one Benjamin Hallam, ploughman, who is, according to my information, in the employ of Master William Buddery. I call on all those within or without to assist me in the execution of my duties as one of His Majesty's justices of the peace for the district of Lothing Land."

It had come then. The highwayman had given a parting blow, and, until I knew more of what was known from Ben, and what had happed on Burny Bush Hill and at Yarmouth, I could not gauge the quality of the danger.

"I am here, Sir Hubert," I cried, rising and going out into the yard.

And if ever I saw a man look bewildered and guiltily conscious of defeat, I saw Sir Hubert.

"'Fore gad," I cried to myself; "he has heard nothing from the ship. One to me.

"If you will be good enough to enter my

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poor farmhouse," said I, "and have some slight refreshment, you can inform me at your ease of what has happed to render this proceeding necessary."

Sir Hubert swung off his horse, giving it to the charge of one of his half-dozen attendants.

"I thank ye," said he. "I will e'en do so."

With that he entered, and Soft Fred grinned behind him.

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CHAPTER XV.

MY POSITION GROWS DIFFICULT.

I CALLED to Mother Durrant and bade her draw a good jug full of strong October; and when Sir Hubert had moistened his throttle, I said, "You scarce thought to find me at home, sir."

He started, and looked through me out of his sly eyes.

"And why not?" said he; "sure, where should you be at this hour if not at home?"

"Nay," replied I, with a laugh, "I saw when you rode up that your friend Lieutenant Phillips had been unable to get a message to you before his ship sailed this morning."

Close as he could play, I saw his cheek change colour. First it paled to a deathly white, and then two bright spots of red

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glowed, and he turned a vicious glance upon me.

"It seems you know my friends better than I do," said he. "Hast been at the strong October before? 'Fore gad, I can make no guess at your meaning."

'Twas no time for another brawl, with half a dozen bullies ready at his call without, so I forbore to give him the lie, and said, "Well, no doubt I am mistook. But what is this of Ben Hallam? I have ever found him a true honest man."

"So honest," said Sir Hubert, "that he has e'en taken to the highway. You have heard of the night rider who eased the pockets of the worthy overmarsh farmers on Saturday night? Your honest man changed a note which had been stolen, and, as the number had been warned, he was taken then and there. But the note is but a small portion of the proceeds of the robberies. We would search his home to see if there is aught more to be recovered there."

'Twas useless to protest. The baronet was in the right of it, and I had no word to answer him.

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"Come, then," said I, "I'll show you where he lives. 'Tis but a step. On my own land."

We went out together, and I made a sign to Fred, who was in talk in his silly way with Sir Hubert's posse, that he should not leave the farm. But the baronet bade his men ride behind us.

The cottage wherein Ben lived was but a four-roomed hovel, and one of the four rooms was rather a larder or dairy than a living place. The grey-haired meagre wife was busy with her clothes line, and her three youngest children were playing about in the road before the cottage door. The eldest were at work in my fields.

When the poor woman saw us she burst out weeping. "Oh, good gentlemen," said she, "never think that my Ben would act dishonest. Master Buddery, will ye not say a good word for a man who has worked faithful for you and your good father ever since he was breeched?"

"I have already said it, Polly," said I. "But Sir Hubert desires to search the cottage, and you must not hinder him."

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I thought the poor woman looked disturbed, and Sir Hubert's keen eyes had not failed to note her change of countenance.

"You'll ha'e to excuse the wash," said she; "I didn't look for gentry."

"Pish," cried Sir Hubert, entering the door of the living room, "what a reek of suds!"

"Marfleet," he cried to one of his men, "come in, will you, and hunt about for what should be here."

A rough-looking tall bully came blustering in, and speedily ransacked the poor drawers and hutches which stood about. The cupboard contained naught save some loaves of home-baked bread, a bit of white bacon, and a piece of cheese. The dairy at the back could screen nothing, and the bully was ordered upstairs. He soon came down again, saying that there was nothing to be found there. He had searched the crannies beneath the thatch. But everything was so dust laden that no hand had been routing or hiding there for years.

Sir Hubert looked disappointed. But

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suddenly he said, "Then we must look for new dug land in the cabbage patch."

Had Polly kept quiet the search in the garden might have passed off easily enough; but she began to cry out that she was sure there was nothing hid there. However, in the middle of the plot of winter green stuff a score or more plants had wilted. They had been stirred about their roots recently, as the eye of any gardener could tell. But Sir Hubert knew naught of the land and the fruits thereof. Had it not been for his bully his raid would have failed, for though I saw the wilted coleworts plain enow, I had no mind to say aught of them. But Marfleet knew a cabbage as well as I did, and no sooner had he noticed the greens than he called for a spade. One stood stuck in the land hard by. He took it, and began to turn up the soil where the plants had been disturbed. A dull sound came up from beneath the land. "I've struck it, sir," said he, and, bending to the spit of his digging he pulled out a battered metal box, and gave it to his master. A wicked laugh sounded from the lips of the magistrate.

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He opened the box, which had ne'er a lock, and there, plain for anyone to see, lay the watches and pocket-book which I had last seen on the highwayman.

"That's enough to settle him," said the baronet. "But search further, Marfleet. There should be close on a thousand pounds in hard coin, unless the worthy farmers have exaggerated their loss for the sake of their own importance. These farming fellows are ever prone to boast, are they not, friend Buddery?"

"You should be the best judge," said I, determined he should not provoke me to a quarrel.

Marfleet dug and dug, till he had destroyed all the green stuff, and turned over nigh a rod of land, but nothing more rewarded him.

"We must make the dog confess where he hath hid it," said Sir Hubert. "And do you, woman, have a care lest the law should regard you as an accomplice of your husband's villainy. I warrant I'll find the means to make the dog speak, and, mind this, if he tell me where to look and I find naught

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in that place, I shall be able to make a shrewd guess at the person who hath removed it. So, for your life's sake, meddle not if you are not so innocent as you make pretence of being. Come, we shall do no good by loitering here longer."

Sir Hubert mounted his horse, which had been led to the cottage from my farm, and saying that he must needs go over Haddiscoe Dam to see Farmer Todd and obtain his identification of at any rate one of the watches, he bade me a curt farewell and rode off down the village.

"A good riddance," said I, as I sat me down again in my kitchen, where Fred had awaited me.

But I had scarce had time to console myself with another draught from the tankard when there came a sound of galloping horse, and Sir Hubert and his men, with Dick Hornet bound and mounted behind one of the bullies, came to a stop at my yard gate.

Sir Hubert swung off his horse, and came swaggering into my kitchen, without a so much as "By your leave."

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"How is this, sir?" said he to me, very fierce. "Hath your intimacy with those of the Bell Mound gone so far that you dare to hide their ill-gotten contraband? Lead me to your barn without delay, and," he added, returning to the doorway and speaking to his men, "surround the yard and barn and see that none escape the holding."

Soft Fred leapt to his feet and began to dance. "I'll show ye, your honour," said he. "Poor Silly Fred'll show ye, for the sake of your gallant horses and riders. Ah! Soft Fred like to see the riders. They look so grand. So grand."

And he capered about the yard, beckoning to Sir Hubert to follow him.

As I passed the mounted company I heard an oath spit from Dick Hornet. "I'll learn ye to tell of me," he said. "Cowardly dog, to betray a poor fellow. You thought you'd seen the last of me. Aha! now we'll see when they find what's in the barn."

At once I saw how it had happed. By bad luck (at least for Dick) the troop had

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come upon him ere he had reached the turning down the sandy lane which leads to the other side of the Mere. And he, in his reckless despair, had grasped the notion that I had put the hounds on his scent. 'Twas not profitable to disabuse him. But I thanked the stars that the band had cleared out the stuff over night, and that Tom had made his escape.

"Why, how's this?" cried Sir Hubert, when capering Fred had led him to the door of the barn, which I had not thought worth while to close after my discovery of the morning. "D—— you, don't make a fool of me," he cried to Fred. "This can't be the place." For it was clear enow that there was no contraband concealed. But for a few sacks of corn (all I now had left) the floor of the barn, the winnowing and threshing space, was as bare as my hand.

"Ehe, ehe, ehe!" giggled Fred. "Nay, sir, I could not do it, not to say make a fool of ye. You called for the barn, and here it be."

"Marfleet," cried Sir Hubert, now pale

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with rage, "bring that poaching dog here."

The bully led Dick forwards.

"Now, you rascal," said the magistrate, "Is this the barn you meant?"

"Ay, your worship," said Dick, whose eyes were staring open with fright and amazement.

I wondered how he had known that we put the stuff there. Could Tom Catchpole—but it was useless to bewilder my senses by guessing this and guessing that. A time would come for all.

"Then where is the stuff?" asked Sir Hubert, furious. "Is there a loft or another barn?"

"There are both," said I, "and, though I have no reason to object to your searching them, I protest that you are acting beyond your rights."

"I am a magistrate," cried he, "and search where I please."

"Well," said I, "I'll go about my business. Fred here will accompany your worship over all my outhouses, ay, and bullock sheds and muck heaps, if ye choose."

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"I doubt whether I ought to let you from my sight," said Sir Hubert.

"Nay," I said, "I'll not run away. You should know, Sir Hubert, whether I am like to run away, and from you."

I laid my hand on the shoulder he had so traitorously wounded, and he looked savage at me.

"I warn ye," said he, "that if I find aught I shall give orders for your arrest."

"Ay," I replied, "I believe you have had some practice at impressment."

To make a brief tale of it, they searched my loft, and found Fred's bed and platter, which he showed them with great delight. They ransacked the smaller barn, ran their hangers into my stacks, and finally rummaged about my very house. But my hiding-place which held the money bags was not to be found by such as they. They were constrained to depart as wise as they had arrived, and to ride back to Burgh with their prisoner, whom one of the wounded keepers afterwards proved to have recognised in the woods and named to the law officers as the man who killed his mate.

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It was now dinner time, and Mother Durrant (whose tongue had lashed the party from attic to basement) was getting the victuals ready. But just as Sir Hubert stirred his horse to start I ran out after him.

"Your pardon," I cried, "but have I power to hear the examination of my poor man?"

I knew well enough that such examination must be open to the people, but I thought fit to ask.

Sir Hubert hummed and hahed, but a clerkly-looking man, who wore his rusty black a horseback as if he were afeared, whispered in his ear. 'Twas an attorney's clerk, who kept the magistrate within the bounds of the law, as well as he might.

"The examination will be open to the public," said Sir Hubert.

"And where and at what time?" I asked.

"At the Great Hall of Yarmouth," said he, looking a trifle askance, for by that I knew that he would not have the sole justicing of poor Ben; and there were more

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than one among the borough justices who looked with slight favour upon the county gentleman.

"I thank ye," said I. "I'll be there in good time. Farewell, Sir Hubert. Commend me to one Jack Phillips, and his quarter-master, when next you have occasion to write to the *Ulysses*.

I thought he would have leapt afoot and come at me again. But he reconsidered it, and, with the very devil in his face, rode on to Yarmouth or Burgh.

I called to Fred, the horn blew for the men in the fields, and we all went in to dinner.

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CHAPTER XVI.

BEN HALLAM'S CONFESSION.

As soon as dinner was over, that is to say, a little past half an hour after noon, I mounted old Faithful, and, giving Fred directions to keep about the place in case I required a messenger to go to the Bell Mound on my return, I rode off to Yarmouth. I called in to see Sam Worship, my attorney, and told him of my adventure with the press gang, and, as was natural for an attorney (for they all love a law suit), he was pressing that I should issue a writ of summons for trespass, and all sorts of terrible sounding offences. "You can charge Sir Hubert with conspiracy," he cried, rubbing his hands together and dreaming of a fat bill of costs. "Place two hundred pounds in my hands as a commencement, and I'll

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warrant ye we'll make these gentlemen smart for it."

But I had other views than that, and, after telling him that if I suddenly disappeared he was to take what steps he thought best for my recovery, bearing in mind that in Sir Hubert I had a powerful and unscrupulous enemy, I left him still begging and imploring me to "do myself justice and proceed for trespass against these ruffianly kidnappers."

But I had seen the old gentleman's professional indignation before; ay, and paid for it, and I was not to be persuaded at that time.

I told him nothing about the highwayman. That was my secret, and, at present, I had no intention of parting with a farthing of my spoils.

I took a little refreshment at the "Old Star," and wended my way to the Great Hall.

I was pleased to see the mayor on the bench—Hal Cordry, a very worthy corn chandler and seedsman, with whom I and my father had had many dealings. Sir

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Hubert had claimed to sit, the offender coming from Lothing Land, over which he had jurisdiction. But there was always some jealousy between the borough justices and the county, and he was refused. He sat, however, behind the mayor, biting his thin lips and looking far from amiable.

Poor Ben was brought in, and he brightened up when he saw me. He knew I would do my utmost for him, and his evident confidence in me made me more determined than ever to do anything short of giving up my horde to free him. I could hardly be expected to surrender all that good brass to release one of my labourers, good ploughman though he was; but, short of that, there was little I meant to stop at.

The butcher who changed the note first told his tale, and then Farmer Shadlow, from Toft, proved that the note was one of which he had been robbed on Burny Bush Hill, at a little after ten on the Saturday night.

The mayor then asked Ben if he had any questions to ask; but the poor fellow

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only mumbled that it might very well be. A lean, white whiskered man, whom I knew to be old Mr. Aldridge, the clerk to the justices, then began to question him.

"Have you any other notes in your possession?" he asked.

Ben gave a quick glance at me, and I signed him to say yes. I don't think this bit of by-play was observed. At all events no notice was taken of it.

"Yes," said Ben. "If your worships will give me leave I would like to tell all about how I got the things."

I showed him that he was doing right. For I knew that the other things had been discovered, and that his best way was now to tell the truth, though what the truth was I had no more idea than Father Adam.

"That was like this here, gentlemen," said Ben, when he was interrupted by the clerk, who said, "You must bear in mind, prisoner, that whatever you say may be used against you. This will not be a case in which confession is like to help you. No King's evidence will avail in this so serious a matter."

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"That's all right, master," said old Ben. "Let me tell the tale my own way and don't keep on a stopping of me, or I shall never ha' done."

At this point the mayor caught sight of me, and beckoned me to go up on the bench behind him. I had often done so before, though, of course, not being on the commission I took no part in the justicing. And I made up my mind to accept his courtesy, for I guessed how wrathful it would make Sir Hubert to have me perched up there beside him. He bent to the mayor and whispered something to him, no doubt to my prejudice, but the worthy old fellow cried, "Pooh, pooh; he's as good a right here as you have, Sir Hubert." And, to my delight, he spoke the words out loud, and his two fellow magistrates smiled at them with approval.

When I had taken my seat, not far from Sir Hubert, Ben recommenced.

"That was like this here, gentlemen," said he, "as all of ye know that's common land between the high road and the marsh against Burny Bush Hill, and, having a

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fancy for a rabbit or two, I'd set half a score snares in the runs where I seed the rabbit workings fresh and frequent. Snares won't hold a fat rabbit all night, though a strong gin will; and that was somewheres about one o'clock when I went up the road to see arter 'em. That wasn't up to much going up the hill at that time o' darkness, for, as ye all know, there's the ghost of Sam Reed to be seen there; but ghost or no ghost, I'd made up my mind for a rabbit, and there worn't so much working anywhere as there was just agin the hill. When I got to the path across the common I saw a lump laying on the grass, beside the road. 'Deary me!' thought I, 'here's some poor chap got his market touch a bit too heavy.' So I goes up to him, for I never could leave a man in liquor to take harm. That don't seem natural to me to do it."

"Yes, yes, my good man," said Mr. Aldridge; "but prithee get on with the facts; you'll keep us all night if you enter into dissertations like this."

"I beg your pardon, gentlemen," said Ben, "I don't know what that long word

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mean, but I'll shape a straight furrow. When I came to the man I saw he was dressed up to snuff, and had a black something over his eyes and nose so as to hide his face. 'Well,' thinks I to myself, 'that's just like what I ha' heared o' the night rider what's been so free with his brass at the "Three Tuns" and other inns. But there don't seem no harm in him now.' Nor more there wasn't, for when I come to lift him up he was stone dead. 'Now,' thinks I to myself, here's a rogue gone, and what's in his pouches is as much the first honest man's as finds him as anybody's. So I cleared out his pockets, and found five great watches and a pocket-book with notes in it."

"Ah," said Aldridge, "are these what you found?"

Poor Ben's face fell when he saw his treasure brought out. "Yes," said he, "them's the ones; but however did ye find them?"

"That's not for you to ask, prisoner,' said old Aldridge. "We have them owing to the great love of justice of a great gentleman, who was so disturbed to hear of the

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highwayman's villainies, that he took upon himself the office of constable."

A laugh greeted this stroke at Sir Hubert and he turned livid, and rose from his seat to leave the bench. But he thought better of it, for he sat down again, biting his lips harder than ever.

"And is that all you found?" asked the mayor, bending forward from his chair.

"Ay, your worship, sir," said Ben, scratching his poll; "and a very tidy all, too, to my mind.

"Was there no coin about the body?" asked the mayor.

"Not as I see," said Ben.

"Well, go on," said the mayor, with discouragement in his voice. I was sure by now that he would have been glad to save Ben if he could, but that it would be difficult for him to do so unless all the money were restored.

"I slipped the things in my pockets," said Ben, "and then I thought to myself, I thought, 'That won't do for me to leave the body lying about here. If that's found there'll be hue and cry and searchings, and

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all sorts of trouble in the parish, and Sir Hubert's men riding here and Sir Hubert's men riding there, and the whole place will be up at Harwich* afore a jack snipe can give a turn.' I was always one for peace and quiet, and, though I thought as the things I'd found belonged right enow to me, yet I knowed as they was found close to the edge of the common, and the Lord of the Manor might have a word to say about 'em. Ye see they meant a deal to my wife and little uns. More grub, and warmer clothing, and a chance in life such as neither their mother nor father ever had."

I saw the tears come to the poor fellow's eyes, as he realised that his hopes had been frustrated. I hardly think he knew in what extremity of danger he stood, he was so taken up with the loss he felt he had sustained.

"Well," said Aldridge, "what did you do with the body?"

Ben scratched his head again. "Please, your honours' worships," said he, "I just took and slung it in the wood on the other

* In a muddle

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side o' the road till I could go home and get a shovel. When I'd done that, I digged a hole and popped him in, and covered up the place all neat with dead leaves. 'There,' thought I, 'that's as good as the gibbet and chains would ha' been for ye, and a sight more comfortabler.'"

"Didn't you take his mask off?" asked the mayor.

Ben looked at Sir Hubert, and, for the moment, I could not guess why. Then I recollected hearing of a rake hell cousin of his, who had played the very devil in the county till he disappeared a year or two ago.

I think Sir Hubert understood, for he went very pale. "There can be no object in asking that," he said. "The man confesses to the larceny. There is no more to be done but to commit him."

"I'll ask you, Sir Hubert, not to interfere," said the mayor. "Had this man been brought before you at Burgh you would, doubtless, have proceeded in the way for which you are somewhat notorious. But in this borough of Yarmouth we, who

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are the magistrates of our city, choose our own manner of dealing out such justice as God has implanted in us. And, to be plain with you, sir, we consider you have taken a liberty in making any suggestion whatever."

There was a murmur of applause in the hall. Never was there a town more jealous of its civic rights than brave old Yarmouth; never were the people of a borough more proud of their unsullied record of freedom; never had they been subjected to the feudal system; and from William Conqueror to the Commonwealth and the Stuarts, never had sovereign dared to cheat them of their time-honoured charter.

"You must answer the question," said the mayor.

"Well, then," said Ben, "I did take off the mask."

"And did you recognise who the man was?"

"Ay," said Ben, again looking at Sir Hubert.

Sir Hubert rose. "I'll no longer countenance such a farce of justice by my pre-

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sence," said he. He was making his way out, when I saw his design.

"He's after the body," I whispered to the mayor. "I'll bet a pound 'tis his scamp of a cousin, Reginald de Burgh, and he'll try to save the disgrace."

"How can we stay him?" asked the mayor, eagerly. "It's in his own district, and out of ours. Who's land is the wood on?"

"It's common land," I said. Then I remembered I was wrong. "No," I cried, "it's Jack Farrer's, the wood merchant's. He bought it from Squire Harvey five years ago."

"Jack Farrer's of Yarmouth?" asked the mayor.

"Yes," said I.

The mayor wrote hurriedly on a sheet of paper, and called one of the officers of the court.

"Take this to Mr. John Farrer's office," said he, "and take a dozen sworn constables with you. Choose dependable men. Mr. Farrer will tell you what to do. Haste; haste."

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He turned to me and said, "Jack Farrer hates him like poison. That letter warned him to go at once with the special constables and guard the place in the wood till he hears more. Aha! Sir Hubert will need to speed to be there in time."

Then he bent forward to Ben again.

"Who was it?" he asked.

Ben looked up at me, and I nodded my head.

"That's God's truth," said he. "You might have knocked me down with a straw. That was young Master Reginald de Burgh."

"As I thought," said the mayor. "The horse was known which was found at the 'Three Tuns,' Haddiscoe, and disappeared so strangely after."

"What?" I cried. "Has the horse disappeared?"

"Sir Hubert has it," said the mayor, "and we may be pretty sure that it cumbereth the ground no longer."

"And that is all you have to tell us?" he asked Ben.

"All, your worship, except I found two

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couple of rabbits in the snares, and wery good they was o' the Sunday."

The mayor turned to his co-justices. "If the money is found on the body I think we may be able to free the man. True, he has run near the mark, and 'twould be easy enow to fit him with a halter; but I would spare him from trial, if it may be. What say ye?"

A whispered consultation followed, after which ten farmers, who had complained of being stopped, were called up one after the other and questioned in so low a voice that I could not hear what was said.

When they had all come and gone, the mayor said to me, "That's the difficulty. They don't want to be hard on the man; but they must get their money back. If he will give it up, or if his tale is true, and he never took it, but it is found on the body, I think I may promise you your ploughman back in time to get the land ready for the barley, eh?"

"I hope so," said I.

"Take him back," said the mayor to the officer in charge of the prisoner. "Do not

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confine him in the common jail, but keep him safe."

"Now, Master Buddery," said he, "'To horse, to horse!' as they used to say within our old walls in time of stress. 'Tis long since I rode faster than an amble; but, egad, I'll venture on a gallop with you to-day."

The other two worthy men spoke up, and said they would come with us; and, after a word with the commitment officer, during which I placed some pieces of gold in his palm to be used in buying comforts for Ben, I went to get my horse, and then repaired to the broad on the South Quay to await the mayor and his friends; for we were all bound to the wood to see how Jack Farrer and Sir Hubert had fared.

But I knew there was no chance of finding the money, and my heart was heavy. Sure, I should not be called on to give it up? Nay! I would not own to the having it. Not for forty Bens. He had spoke the truth, and if they hanged him for it, his blood would be on their heads, not on mine.

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CHAPTER XVII.

THE HIGHWAYMAN'S GRAVE.

I WAS first at the trysting place upon the South Quay; but I had scarce brought my horse to a standstill when the mayor rode from the seaward town, with his two fellow magistrates, and, to my surprise and amusement, old Master Aldridge, the clerk, mounted on a tall raw-boned grey.

The justices seemed bright in spirit of frolic, but their clerk wore a mournful face. "Oh, Lord! Master Buddery," quoth he, "'tis ten good years since I was a horseback, and I would not venture now, but that I fear our worthy mayor hath exceeded his powers. Special constables he may indeed enrol for the borough of Yarmouth, but this matter lies beyond his jurisdiction;

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and if Sir Hubert get to the quarry first I fear there may be trouble for us."

"Trouble be d——d," cried the hearty mayor. "Ride, my hearties. 'Tis ten to one but we shall be there first."

Despite the groanings of Master Aldridge, who was now upon his horse's mane, now upon his crupper, yet ever careering forward at good speed and with right brave courage, we kept a rare pace along the high road, and when we came to the Belton four crossways we saw the baronet riding with a strong party, but a good mile over towards Burgh, across rough common land. We were in time, but we spared not to spur on for all that, and we got to the wood beside Burny Bush Hill just as Sir Hubert and his men broke out into the road, scarce within sight, over the brow of the hill.

Jack Farrer and the sworn men were gathered round the place mentioned by old Ben, and at our coming they hailed us with a shout, and one of their number came forward with a spade.

"Nay," said the mayor, with a laugh,

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"seeing that we are here first we will do Sir Hubert the courtesy to await his arrival."

The delay was short, and we were scarce dismounted when the baronet galloped up, white with fury.

"I warn ye all to leave the wood," cried he. "I am the magistrate for this quarter, and 'tis for me to investigate what truth is in the words of that felon you hold in such easy custody."

"Sure," said Jack Farrer, "a man may be on his own land without your permission, sir."

"What," cried Sir Hubert, "are you there, Mr. Farrer?" And I could see that he was thwarted.

"Ay," said Jack, "I have heard some tale of a number of pheasants in my wood, and have a mind to invite my friends to see some sport."

As he spoke he showed a fowling piece, and two or three more guns were visible among the men about him.

"Pooh," cried the baronet, "what need for further pretence? We all know why we are come hither, and though for divers reasons

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I hoped for greater privacy, yet there will be little good in delay. Come, let us unearth this poor fellow, whoever he may be, for we have only the word of a rogue that he wore mask or was other than an honest gentleman."

"'Tis not for you to prejudge any man," cried the mayor in some heat; "but you say well that there is no reason for delay. Use your spade, my man, beneath these dead leaves, which have a look of fresh work. What's there may be seen by all."

Despite the strife between the two parties, I think a soberness fell on nigh all of us assembled there. Whoever he was it was a dead man whom we sought, and a man whose death was a mystery to all but myself.

The frost held beneath the shade of the woods, and the leaves crisped and crackled as the shovel displaced them. But beneath them the land lay soft, and there was little difficulty in distinguishing the spot which had been recently turned up.

"Gently, gently, man," said the mayor, stepping forward as the shovel turned the

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first spit over the grave. "Have a care ye do not cut the body."

Ben had not thought it needful to dig deep. But one spit down the spade struck on somewhat soft, and, with half a dozen scoops of loose earth, the mould-encrusted shape of a man lay in the shallow narrow trench at our feet.

A silence fell on all, and there was some hesitation before the features were uncovered.

"Is it your pleasure to be the first to see him, Sir Hubert?" asked the mayor, speaking low and very gentle.

"I?" cried Sir Hubert. "Nay, why should I be the first? What is this fellow to do with me?"

'Twas on the tip of my tongue to ask why he had ridden so sharply to forestall us if he had no care in the matter, but the place and occasion were unfitted for bickerings, and I held my peace.

"Dust the mould off his poor face," said Jack Farrer. "Whate'er he was, he's beyond our vengeance now. Stay, what is that?"

He stooped over the grave and picked up

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a strip of black cloth, fouled with the earth. 'Twas the mask.

"The prisoner's words hold good," said the mayor. "This is the mask he spoke of."

"Pish," cried the baronet; "he could very well have concealed it there himself. A shrewd rascal, take my word for it."

No one deigned to answer the man. Perchance all felt pity for what we guessed would lie before him when the body was uncovered.

The man who had used the spade stooped low, and brushed the mould from the face of the dead man.

We all knew it, but the baronet stood too far back to see.

"Will ye not step forward, Sir Hubert?" asked the mayor. "'Tis a face you should know. Ay, and a body of which you should have the disposal."

I saw reluctance in the man's face. Reluctance, and a shadow of what might have been sorrow. He had been hail fellow well met with the gallant youngster who had come to so terrible an end.

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He stepped forward, and peered into that face which had often laughed with him over the dice and punch bowl; the face which had wrought as much ill as the baronet's own, with its accursed beauty. I wondered I had not known it even in the dark and when shrouded with the mask. For it carried its years lightly, and death had taken away the lines which loose living and troubled days must needs have implanted on it during life.

Sir Hubert said no word, but his features writhed as he stood in silence looking down. Now that the first shock of certainty was over, I think he felt the shame to his name more than grief for the loss of an old comrade.

At length he spoke.

"I claim this body as that of my kinsman, Reginald de Burgh," said he. "Leave me to attend to its removal—ay, and to seek vengeance for the poor fellow's death."

"That can hardly be," said the mayor. "I must first ascertain if the coin which the farmers make such a coil about is on the body. You see the man Hallam's statement hath so far been verified. We may

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hope, then, that the spoils which were other than the watches and notes are still about the body."

"Whatever lies on this body I claim as next of kin," cried Sir Hubert. "Touch not a thing, or I will hold you responsible."

"I will take any such responsibility," said the mayor. "And on your part I warn you that if you hinder me in my duty I shall summon these men to assist me by force, and we are three to one."

At a sign from him two of the men raised the body from the grave, and I recognised the coat and hat which the man wore when he thrust his barker in my face.

The Mayor bent down and searched with care in every pocket. But, as my readers know, there was naught else to be found, save a kerchief, bearing neither name nor letters. Twice did the worthy Hal Cordry turn out the pockets, twice feel in every inch of lining, every stitch of clothing. Then he rose, but said, "The body must needs be submitted to the coroner. I will notify him, and, with that reservation, you are at liberty to bear it where you choose, sir."

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" Ay, ay," squealed Master Aldrich, " there must needs be a crowner's quest."

We bared our heads as Sir Hubert and two of his men bore the poor lifeless thing and laid it athwart a horse. They rode off slowly, and with bowed heads. Then the mayor turned to me and said,

" That's well enough, friend Will; but without we can lay our hands on that cash I doubt it will prove hard for your man. What the plague can he have done with it ? "

Shortly after we parted, and I rode home with a heaviness upon me. I could, if I chose, save this man, but at the cost of the good brass that I loved. The wizard's jingle rang in my head. " A murrain on it," said I.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

OFF WITH THE OLD LOVE.

EVENING had closed in when I got to the farm. The men had come in from the fields, and were gone to the "Jolly Anglers" or the "Pot in Hand" for a sup of beer before their supper. No one was about the house but Molly, the dairy maid, and housemaid, and Mother Durrant. I was disturbed in mind with the remembrance of Ben Hallam's danger, and my part in it, and I wished to be alone, so that it fell out well that Mother Durrant (after a grumble or two at my "gadding about") withdrew to the upper part of the house to see about some matters of linen or what not.

I sat me down by the ingle nook in the great kitchen, and gazed into the glowing fire of green ash and sea coal. Soft Fred

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was in his loft, where I could hear him yelling some uncouth song. Except when alone with me or the gang of the Bell Mound he kept up his farce of idiocy. No doubt he found his benefit in it, as many and many a marshman has done before and since.

It was quite dark outside, so that though I heard some light footsteps trip over the cobbles in the yard, I could not see who approached till the figure stood within the door.

"Why, Nell!" I cried. "What brings you here, girl?"

For it was Nell Catchpole, the very last woman on earth whom I desired to encounter.

I stayed on my stool and did not trouble to rise to greet her, and she came close up to me, a smile upon her saucy face.

Nell was the very opposite of Judith. A flaxen-haired, blue-eyed wench, light on her feet and light in her manners, but very taking withal in her demure advances. Ever since she had been a bouncing girl of fifteen she had claimed a lover, and in my time I had been one of a long line. Perhaps it was because I was superior in station to her other

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fancies that she had kept to me longer than was her wont. Perhaps the girl really thought she cared for me. I had been her lover, as any young countryman may be the lover of a pretty village wench, without thought of marriage, or aught but the pleasure of the moment. But since I had seen Judith, and known that my heart was bound to her in ties very different to any I had acknowledged before, I had thought of this jade but little. Man is oft-times unfair to the old love when the new love comes; and so it was with me. Not that Nell had any cause for complaint. She had forsaken so many that it was but fair she should in her turn come to weary an admirer. But it is hard to think sedately in the presence of tempting rosy cheeks, soft blue eyes, and lips pouting for kisses which had once been freely bestowed and as freely returned.

"What, Will," said she, "hast no kiss for your Nell?"

She offered her lips to me, and, egad, they were soft and luscious. I did not resist them. Reader, could you have denied so tender an appeal?

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"Ah, Will," said she, but with more laughter than resentment in her tones, "I fear that 'twas but a manners kiss. Your heart went not with it; and yet, sure I should be as good as any smuggling lass of them all! What's this I hear of you and Judith Mallard? Our Tom is in rare temper. He hath loved her long, and with devotion such as she will never win from you, I doubt! And now he has fled to hide with mother and me, swearing he will have your life's blood for coming betwixt him and her. Was you not satisfied with me, Will, dear? Sure, I denied you naught?"

The minx laughed in my face even as she spoke.

"Ay, Nell," said I, "you were never much given to denying."

"Well, what is a girl to do?" she cried. "You men are slow to marry. Are we to waste our best years awaiting for a husband? Nay, that would never fit my will. But we've had merry times, Will, and for old sake's sake I've come to warn ye."

"Warn me," I cried. "Why, what harm can Tom do me? There's a price upon him,

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as you know, for that affair over on Lowestoft beach. He dare not show to do me hurt."

"Never trust to what an enemy may not dare," said the girl seriously. "Already he hath betrayed his own gang for vengeance sake, and told Dick Hornet where the contraband was hid in the barn."

"Ay," said I, "but an he can do no worse than that he is welcome to wreak me all the ill he choose. Why, lass, think you I should suffer contraband in my barn? But Dick was taken, as you may have heard, and e'en brought Sir Hubert here with his troop; but devil an anker or a bale did they find! So it was Tom who betrayed me! A pretty return to me for saving his life."

"Nay," said she, "he says he owes ye naught for that, for you did it for the love of Judith. Is't true, Will; are you fairly caught at last? Shall we have no more nights together under the stars? Oh, Will, Will, I doubt you're but a fickle lover!"

She bore no malice. Not a mite of it, for she laughed and stroked my hair while she spoke.

"Well, Will," she continued, "I bear ye

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no ill will. Had ye not changed I doubt but I should have wearied of you. You men are all alike, gentry or simple. It's all kisses and what kisses lead to with you; and, well, I like it enough, for change is good for us all. But I shall ever have a tender spot in my heart ('tis, as you know, a roomy heart) for you. And again I warn ye have a care. Tom is not one to throw his life away for naught; but rather than be baulked of his vengeance on you, he'll come out into the open and do his best to have your blood. He says he's killed one man and is sought for it, and that one more or less now will make but little difference."

"Why, Nell, lass," cried I, "how will he do it? I'm his match any day of the week."

"Ay," she said, "you're strong enow. The strongest man that ever had his arms round me. Dear Will, how close ye can clasp!"

"You impudent baggage!" I cried, but laughing too. "I think you would laugh in your coffin."

The girl turned serious, as I had rarely seen her before.

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"And why not, Will?" said she. "Would it not soon be the best place for me? If ever I were sought in marriage I should fear to wed. Nay, one man would never suffice for me, I must e'en have change. What is the end of a lass like me, when I'm old enough to lose my beauty (for I am pretty, Will. Say I am.)"

"You are, you little devil." I said. "As pretty as you are wanton."

"Well, when I lose my prettiness what's in store for me? I must e'en turn hag or witch; and oh, but I dread old age."

"Nay, lass," said I, with some feeling, "you have come to warn me for old sake's sake—sure I'll never let you want. I could no more see ye starve than I could hurt a child. In sooth, you are but a naughty child for all your five-and-twenty years."

"Ay, you have a good heart, Will," said she. "I wish I loved ye better. I'd make ye love me then—ay, well enow to wed me; but us poor lasses are e'en as we are made."

She was sitting quiet and gentle on my knee. There was no nonsense going on between us, but she sat on her old lover's

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knee as any sister might have sat. I had never seen her true self before, and I could not but feel a pity; ay, and a tenderness for this poor frail pretty thing. She spoke sooth when she said she could not help her nature. And there had been tender passages between us. No matter how many forerunners a lover may have he always believes himself the best loved. 'Tis his own vanity which makes him see reason in the preference he thinks he has.

But though, as I have said, there was no nonsense going on between us, the sight of a lass on my knee was more than Mother Durrant could stomach; and, as ill luck would have it, she entered the kitchen before Nell could get away.

"Now, Master Will," said the old woman, "I'll have you to know that if you're a going to have your dirty trollops in the house itself, I'll be a going. What ye do outside is no business of mine. Young men will be young men; but I'll see the farmhouse is kept respectable so long as I'm in it. As for you, you saucy baggage, how dare you sit on his knee before the fire which

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saw his dear father and mother sitting in the good old times when men was rightly men and women women? Ha' done with your impudence!"

"Don't be jealous, mother," said Nell. "You've had your time in your day. But fare ye well, Will. Take heed to my words, and may ye win your pleasure with your new love. Nell Catchpole bears ye no grudge. All well, mother, I'm going."

But for all her light words and brave bearing before my old housekeeper, I think there were tears in her eyes as she went out of the door. Ah! Nell was better than she made herself out to be; had she possessed but consistency and a steadfast heart, she would have been a bride of whom anyone might have been proud. But the fairies when they gave her her beauty, brightness, wit, and good heart, spoiled all with her recklessness and wanton mutability.

I turned on Mother Durrant, and I bade her hold her peace, for she railed on even after the lass was gone.

"Hold your mobbing slaver," said I. "Have ye not learnt charity in your old

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age? The lass and I were doing no wrong. Ha' done wi' your jealousies, or if ye will to leave the farm ye may e'en do so."

This brought the old woman to tears, as I had a mind it should. For I was wroth at the affront she had put upon the girl who had come to do me a service. I believe I thought more tenderly of her ever after. Poor Nell, her end was sad, but it hath no part in this story.

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CHAPTER XIX.

THE WIZARD SUMMONS ME.

I WAS still weary from my exertions in escape from the man-o'-war. My wound still troubled me somewhat, though the lotion and unguent which the wizard had used had acted as miraculous healers. The day had been trying, for I had scarce spent an hour free from stress and anxiety, so that I was not long after my men in seeking my sleeping chamber.

The next day I again lay late, and when I went up to the loft to seek Fred, somewhat wondering that he had not come to rouse me, I found him gone. Well, I could trust him, and doubted not that he was about some service of my own or of the Bell Mound gang.

I passed the day quiet enough, striding

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about my fields, and a little bitter that Ben Hallam was not to hand to get on with the twenty acre field, which lay ready strewed with rich stuff from the pig styes for ploughing and setting with barley when the time should come. A frost might fall at any time, and then the plough must needs lay up. The air was shrewder, and methought that the light frosts of the open weather we had hitherto enjoyed would soon give way to the grip which binds the sods in iron. A heavy grey sky and a slant of wind from the north prophesy snow before frost, and if snow fell my comings and goings could not be so easily concealed, for snow is a tell-tale tablet for the quill of a man's feetings.

After dinner time, while Mother Durrant was churning in the dairy and so out of the way, Nell came again, and told me that her brother Tom had left his mother's cottage.

"Where he is I know not," said the girl; "but have you a care how ye go abroad. If he could trust Sir Hubert, I believe he'd even join himself to the Burgh party to wreak his vengeance on you; but he loves his own

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neck too well for that. He will not pay a price without a fair return. I know, Will, from old times, that naught will keep ye long from your love. Ah, dear! the old times were sweet, too. When ye cross common keep a sharp eye; the gorse and broom is good cover, and surprise wins many a battle."

I thanked her, for she meant well; but sure she might have known I was a better man than Tom. Before she went she flung her arms round me and kissed me fiercely on the lips. "The last time, dear Will," said she, "the last time; and I suppose I should not want ye so did I not know I had lost ye. Well, many's the lad I've wearied of. Fare ye well, Will; don't think hard of me, for, by my heart, I never liked man better."

I could not be rough with the lass. I kissed her, and begged her to remember she aye had a friend in me. And she left me, weeping without disguise. Poor lass, poor lass! I might pity her if I might no longer love her and deal with her in the way of jolly country lovers.

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My mind ran much on Ben Hallam as the dusk closed in, and the guns of the flight shooters began to roar about the mere and down to mash. I had heard no new tidings of him, nor had any news come to me from Yarmouth or Burgh. Somehow, that night I was loth to go to bed; Fred had not returned, and I wondered what he was about. I sat late over the fire, and still the thought of Ben Hallam troubled me; but when I remembered the lump of brass in my secret place I glowed with warmth of pleasure. For there was enow to buy me seed and stock, and pay five hundred off the mortgage on the land which Master Worship, my attorney, and his father before him, had held for a hundred years.

'Twas close on midnight when I rose with a yawn and went out into the yard to look at the night. The snow had held off as yet, but I could smell it in the wind. My breath went up steaming where the glow from the light within fell upon it against the background of the dark without. I stood against the door, scarce a yard away from it, and even as I thought to lock up and go to bed

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I was startled by hearing seven clear, sharp raps against the lower wicket (the door swung in two parts, as many of our farm-house kitchen doors are used to do) almost to my hand.

"Good gad!" I cried, "what's that!"

I stood and stared about me, within and without, but not a living thing could be seen. "Ah!" thought I, "the rats are at their games."

As if in derision of my thoughts, again the seven raps sounded loud and distinct; and, at the last of them, a light, like a hob-o'-lantern, glowed in from the roadway without the yard.

Then I remembered that Judith had given seven raps before the door of the Bell Mound cottage had been opened to us that night when first she sought my aid. And, with the remembrance, came the recollection of the gauger's tale of flitting lights. But those lights bade no good to the revenue men—could I trust this?

As if in answer to my unspoken doubt the seven raps came again, more clearly, more distinctly, firmer than before. It was

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as though they bade me trust this floating star. What could this bode? I looked at the light, and it moved away towards the common. Then I understood.

"'Tis another touch of the wizard's art!" I cried. "But it passes my understanding how he hath sound and light at his beck and call."

And let those who dwell in towns laugh at the wondrous powers of man and woman about the wild marshes, even as my grandson from Yarmouth Grammar School is wont to do in this year of our Lord 1850. Those who have seen what I have seen and heard what I have heard, know better than to put a limit to what God or Satan may permit their servants to control or know. These mysterious doings of witches and wizards which were so common in the days of our fathers have become the scorn of men who are happy in their ignorance, and who think that by eating a turnip with their mutton they learn what makes the seed swell to green and the root bulb and grow. 'Tis the close life within narrow streets, the vain pride of knowledge of small things, the foul

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air and living of the towns, the emptiness of the learning of books which kills the soul for good or evil. But where Nature rules there will ever be those who know the powers of the unseen. I am confident enow that those scholars who read this story will scoff and jeer at what they call the superstition of ignorance. Ay! but the ignorance is theirs. Can they see at a distance? Can they call the elements of Nature to their aid? Can they strike from afar? 'Tis we who know that all truth comes from God, and who have seen the wonders of the wild marsh folk, who should rightly scorn these shallow babblers with their "exact knowledge," as they call it, being indeed exactly blind to all but what a hog can know as well as they. Nay, the hog hath the better of it, for many a time have I seen my old boar shiver and cower into his shed when something unseen has passed by on the wind. Ay, and no dog but could tell these scholars more than they are ever like to learn, had the faithful creature power of speech.

This is beside my tale, but it stirs my bile

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to see the foolish conceit of book learning. The wind of the night, and the whisper of the waste lands and waters can teach more to those who do not disdain to strive to read them than any mouldy print, or preacher or lecturer with swollen tongue and head.

These are the words of experienced age. At the time when the summons came for me I was amazed at this sign of the wizard's strength, instead of wondering that we silly mortals should care to know so little of the greatest of all learning—the learning of the unseen.

"Rap, rap, rap, rap, rap, rap, rap," again at my elbow.

I hurried me within and donned my cap and wrapper for my neck. Then I took a stout cudgel and locked up the house and started off in pursuance of the light, which sped along the high road in the direction of Burny Bush Hill till I was fairly on my way, and then disappeared.

"Oho," I thought, "I'm to go by the path across the common."

The old moon was in its last days, and would not show till morning was near, but

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from a clear sky the stars shone very bright, for the heavy greyness had passed, though I could still smell snow. I was soon at the turning, and struck across the common, which lay gloomy and dark, save for a light rime which was settling on the tops of the bushes. I heard the cry of peewits and fowl and the rustle of rabbits scurrying about the warm lays beneath the gorse and dead bracken, or amidst the close growth of the ling. But, except for these, there was a great silence on the land. When I came to the top of the common and looked below on the Bell Mound and the sweep of marsh, I saw a keel boat making up the Waveney towards Beccles, but never another sign of human life was visible from where I stood. I was close up to the swinging bushes which Judith had taught me were the secret gate to the cottage, and before I turned in I stopped and looked about me: Why, I know not, unless the warning of Nell throbbed in my brain, for somehow I felt that I was not alone upon the common. Ah! a dark shape of a man rose swiftly and silently from a patch of gorse not fifteen

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yards from where I stood. I saw the glint of a barrel in the starlight, and a report shook the air. I felt the bullet whizz through my hair, and, with instant appreciation of the answering play, I fell to the ground as if shot, and lay motionless. 'Twas odds that the cowardly fellow who shot at an unarmed man would spare to fire his other barker, if indeed, he had more than one. Still as death I lay, my face fixed as though in the anguish of death, my eyes open, and staring dreadfully at the sky overhead.

'Twas nerve-trying work to lie in such wise, and hearken to the stealthy approach of my enemy; but I steeled my heart and brain to do it, and I won my reward.

For, presently, with an evil light of victory in his eyes, Tom Catchpole bent over me and laid his hand on my heart—to see, no doubt, if I were entirely dead.

In a trice I had seized him round the arms, and pulled him down beside me; and there, on the grass between the walls of gorse and broom, we fought it out. I was not yet in my full strength, and my left shoulder lacked

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something of its proper power; but neither had Tom fully mended of his hurts, and I found the strength of my right arm and side enough to hold him so that he could not get at steel or pistol. Over and over we rolled, Tom roaring curses, while I kept my breath as best I could. I heard a cry from over the Mound, and knew that our struggle would soon have witnesses. Tom's ears were sharp as mine, and desperately he strove to get away, but his weakness came upon him sooner than my strength died. Before our man to man endeavour could be interrupted I was atop of him, my fingers clutching his throat, and my body laid on his arms to ward off any mischief from his hands. He gasped and gurgled, and grew black in the face, and I felt his form grow limp beneath my clutch. Then I knew I might rise and bind him, for his senses were gone, and a little more of my gripe on his throat would have sent his life after them.

I got on to my knees and wiped the sweat from my brow and face. A faintness came over me, and I was in terror lest he should recover while the weakness held me in bond.

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But the sweet night air revived me, and the deep gasps of breath I took soon brought me to myself. I had twisted his hands behind him, and was binding them firm with the wrapper from my throat when Soft Fred and old Bill Prettyman came at a rush through the swinging bush gate, and at their heels came Judith, still urging them to greater speed.

"Welcome, friends," I cried. "You are in time to help me convey this cur to some safe place where we can deal with him at leisure. 'Tis the second time he has betrayed his oath to the gang."

I heard a groan from the man at my feet. Tom was coming round, and had heard my words.

"I took no oath to you," said he. "What-e'er the others done, I took no oath."

"But you took one to us," said Bill, very stern; "and if 'tis truth what our master saith, that you have played the traitor not once, but twice, short, short will be your shrift, as well ye know."

"Oh, Will!" cried Judith, running to me. "Are you hurt? I heard the shot,

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and dreaded lest Sir Hubert's men had stricken you at last."

"Nay, lass," said I, "a bit winded from my fight, but scatheless from the fellow's pistol. Ah, and did you think of me so kind, Judith? Lass, lass, wilt not own you love me?"

"You ever choose your time of wooing ill, sir," said she, but with a laugh which cheered my heart. "See, 'tis time now to bring this man to judgment. Bear him within, friends. My grandfather will give orders as to his disposal."

They made a chair with their arms and carried him within the gate. He made no effort to escape. He felt retribution was close at his heels. But he had strength, ay, and will, to scowl at me and mutter curses as he saw me with Judith by my side. And, as he passed from us, a sob broke from him. I knew why he sobbed. 'Twas in despair of love. And, rogue though he had proved to be, I could not but pity him.

"Come, Will," said Judith. "Grand-dad awaits ye. He said he would give you another touch of his art to bring you hither.

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Art beginning to believe there may be more than you can see ? "

" I care not what there be," I cried, in an ecstasy, " if you will but love me, dear."

" The time is near for you to win or lose my love," she said, a little sadly. " Even I, even grand-dad, cannot tell how a man will deal with his soul. The crisis is close. 'Tis for you to confront it."

" Nay," said I, " these be riddles. Wilt not whisper to me what I should do ? "

" It may not be," said she. " Only be true to your better self; remember what grand-dad foretold the night you first came hither, and, ay pray God to lead you right Power hath grand-dad over many strange things, but none over the makings of a man."

I followed her towards the cottage, and a solemn resolution grew in me that I would indeed strive to be worthy of this pearl of women so far as in me lay. But of what nature was the ordeal ? Would God I knew.

She led me to the cottage door, and beckoned me in.

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CHAPTER XX.

TOM AND I ARE EACH WEIGHED IN THE BALANCE.

THE chamber into which she took me was the same as that in which I had first seen her wizard grand-dad. The lights were as before, and about the room stood a cluster of the men who had given me their rough hearty hands in troth of fealty. The old chief himself appeared to have entirely shaken off the marsh ague, for he stood by the ingle nook and advanced to greet me. His head was still as fleshless, his eyes as glittering and deadly dim alternately. But he carried himself nigh upright, and his coverings were cast off. Indeed, so changed was his raiment, that but for his unforgetable face and eyes, 'twould have been hard to recognise him. For never courtier wore finer coat or breeches, grander

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stock, or softer shining silken hose. Rich lace hung at his cuffs, and a gem-studded sword hilt sparkled at his belt.

Soft Fred and Bill Prettyman had borne Traitor Tom within, and set him on his legs in a corner of the room. They stood still as sentinels beside him, their eyes fixed on the stern features of their master.

"I give you greeting, Master Buddery," said the old man. Then, with a smile on his thin shrivelled lips, he added, "My message reached you, then. But first to deal with this man. Then I have somewhat for your private ear."

I took his hand in mine and felt the strength of grip that had so surprised me before. When we had unclasped I stepped to Judith's side, and she smiled up at me for an instant, ere she looked sadly on the bound man in the corner.

"I ask ye to proceed with your impeachment of this man," said the old chief.

"Nay," said I, "I'm none the worse for him. Let him go, poor devil. He'll have his work cut out to cheat the law without any impeachment of mine."

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For a moment anger lit the chief's face with passion. "Sir," said he, "you have bound yourself to us, and are therefore pledged to do my bidding. Give your testimony of this man's treachery. I command you."

I still hesitated, but Judith touched my hand with hers and whispered, "Do as he bids."

"In the first place," said I, "I accuse him of telling Dick Hornet that the contraband was hid in my barn; and, but that you had the foresight to remove it when you did, Sir Hubert and his myrmidons would have e'en found it there."

"What proof have you that he did this?" asked the chief, very stern.

I saw Tom look eager at me for my answer. He had not known of Nell's visits to me, but I think he guessed.

"The proof that Dick Hornet came to me straight from his mother's cottage, whither he fled from my sanctuary," said I, "and offered to trade his knowledge, and that upon his being taken by Sir Hubert he did betray what he had learnt, so that

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"Judith touched my hand with hers and whispered,
'Do as he bids.'"

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my barn, loft, and eke my house were searched."

"'Tis enough," said the chief. "What answer hast thou, traitor?"

"I would have him declare whence he got his knowledge," said Tom. "Perchance my sister Nell hath been with him, according to her wont."

Judith looked at me, and I gazed fondly in her eyes. She saw truth in my look, and she smiled again with a heightened colour.

"'Tis not needful," said the chief. "The results of your breach of troth are sufficient to condemn you. But, Master Buddery, what of to-night? How did Fred and my good friend Bill find you in such strife, and after the sound of a shot?"

"'Twas like this, sir," said I (and for the life of me I could not but speak with respect to this old smuggler). And I told him how all had happed.

"Your answer?" said the chief to Tom; who, to do him justice, held his head high and cowered not a jot from fear.

"'Tis as he says," said he. "I have a private quarrel with the man."

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"Your private quarrels are naught to us. You were informed that he had taken the oath, and that I had accepted him as one of us. Speak, Fred. You told him of it?"

"I did," said Fred.

"Take him away, men," said the chief, with a wave of his bony arm. "Traitor is he and traitor's meed shall be his."

"Your pardon, sir," said I, for, for all the man's villainy I could not but feel that it was jealousy and love of Judith that had made him my enemy, and I was grieved for the poor wretch. "I wouldn't have him come to harm on my account. Come, Tom," said I, going up to him, "if you will but give me your hand and pledge yourself to be true to your mates, I'll never bear grudge against ye."

He looked at me with wonderment. "Ah," said he, "but ye mean ill to little missy here."

"Ill!" I cried. "I'd die for her. Ay, willingly. Come, man, I guess your case. But sure you must see 'tis not for those who love her to wrangle and try to cut

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each other's throats. Hast not heard Sir Hubert hath cast his eye upon her, and that I made him pay for his rudeness?"

"I know not what to do. Alas! I know not," said poor Tom, and he began to blubber like a child. "But, Master Buddery," he sobbed, "ye looked upon missy, and I knew the look. And I know, too, the pride of you gentry farmers. What is she to you, or you to her? Can aught good of it come to her?"

"See here, Tom," I cried, taking my lady's hand in mine, "if aught ill comes to her through me, may I die the death of a rabid dog. Truly hath she saved me from impressment. Truly would I give my heart's blood for her, ay, as any man of us all would."

"'Tis enough, sir," said the chief. "These things are not to be said in this wise. My grand-daughter hath no need of traitorous support. Hale him away, my lads. But, out of courtesy to Master Buddery, who fought so gallantly to avenge your lady, I will stay his punishment till we have further discussed it."

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I thanked the old man, and then I said to Tom, "Come, lad, give me an honest grip." And I held my hand out to him. The poor fellow was dazed, but he overcame his resentment, and, with tears in his eyes, he gave me such a clasp that I knew I could trust him thereafter. Then Fred and Bill bore him without, and, at a sign from the chief, all left the room but the wizard, Judith, and myself.

"First," said the old man, "I would see your wound. You have not disturbed the dressing upon it?"

"Nay," said I. "And 'tis nigh mended."

"Sit ye down," said he. And, when I had obeyed him, he bared my shoulder and took off the bandage which he had wrapped round it after the fight. Judith busied herself in getting lotion and unguent, and, after a glance at the wound, the old man bade her fetch what he called the red unguent. This did he plaster upon me, and, in good sooth, it burnt me more than the wound. But, if I may anticipate, the next morn found me strong as ever. What curious herbs or medicaments were used

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I know not. But Judith hath the trick of making it to this day.

When my coat was on my shoulders again, the old man and Judith both seated themselves. A flagon stood on the table and a pitcher of water. On being bid, I helped myself to a gill or so from the flagon, but, at the old man's word, I forbore to add water. "Take it as it is, lad," said he. "'Tis sovereign cordial." And, indeed, it was mellow and soft and sweet and ran through my veins like fire. The old man drank from a small silver beaker, and his eyes glowed as the strong cordial warmed him.

"Thyme and many herbs of moor and marsh were gathered for this ere you were born," said he. "But what is this I hear of one Benjamin Hallam, a ploughman of your own?"

Now I could not meet his glance steady as I told the tale, and all the time I was speaking I felt Judith's eyes upon me, and there was pain in them, but hope too. What did it portend?

He heard me out in silence. Then said he, "And canst do naught to help him?"

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"I have tried my hardest, sir," said I. "But I doubt they will not free him without the money is recovered."

"And should money stand before a man's honour?" cried he. "Is that the meaning of Master Buddery?"

I had no answer for him. The brass I loved weighed down upon my tongue. Must I then give it up, and with it the hope of making a home fit for the girl whom I loved?

"Hast thou no answer, Will?" said Judith, and there was reproach in her soft words. I looked at her, the old man looked at me, for I felt his eyes burning into my very soul.

How it was I know not. But this I know, that some men have the power to compel the inmost secrets of the heart. Some light of woman's love to make a man rise above himself.

"Hast thou no answer, Will?" asked Judith again.

And, in the silence of the room, broken for a space by the crackling fire alone, I seemed to hear that awful cackling, croaking voice wheeze out—

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"Put your love before your brass,
What ye will will come to pass."

Ay, and had not Judith repeated the words to me! Sudden I loathed the bags I had so treasured. Sudden the brass I had so joyed to lay hold on seemed to me to be instinct with evil, which writhed in about the rich gold as deadly worms or vipers might do amidst fallen rose leaves. What was brass to me if Judith loved me? And could she love me if I placed brass before my heart? Was she not worth more than all the gold in the world? What though our lives were spent in honest toil and penury? She would be with me, and trouble shared with her were worth more than ease and comfort enjoyed apart from her. Ah! I knew the meaning of those rhyming syllables now. Like all the farmers and marshmen, too, I had made the love of brass a god. I had gambled it away, but in the hopes of winning more. 'Twas love of brass that had ruined me. For, but for the love of the gold, I had never thrown the dice in eagerness to win more. And now was I to throw a main for my love? To

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me the minutes of silence seemed like years. The old man's eyes watched me keenly, without sympathy or repulsion. But I knew that in Judith's gaze there was sympathy, anxiety, pity, and, somehow, it seemed to me that it needed but one thing to add love to their beauty—and love of me.

I looked up, and at once those old, old eyes, with their wondrous throbbing flames, brightened, and the old man smiled.

Judith clasped her hands together, and said again, very soft, very low, and, oh! so tender—

"Hast no answer, Will?"

"Ay, have I," said I. "I have the money. The highwayman stopped me when I was a riding home with empty pockets, and I struck him from his horse. Then I lightened him of his brass, and left the watches and notes you wot of, though how you have the knowledge I do not comprehend. I have the brass, and 'twas in my pouches when Judith came to me over the common and summoned me to your aid. Ay! I have the brass, and will restore it so that poor Ben shall go free. But 'twill

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ruin me I doubt, for Sir Hubert had won my last shilling of ready money, and I know not—Oh! how can I hope for the desire of my life without the means to provide for her as a queen?"

And in my despair at what the surrender of the money meant to me, I bowed my head upon my hands and wept.

But what was this? I heard the old man laugh, and I felt soft arms about my neck which drew away my hands. Then, with a laugh and a sob, Judith sank into my arms and pressed her lips to mine.

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CHAPTER XXI.

A VENIAL SUBTERFUGE, WHEREBY BEN IS FREED.

SCARCE knowing if I woke or dreamed I held my darling close against my breast and kissed her again and again, careless of the old grand-dad, who sat chuckling on the other side of her.

"Well, lad," said he, "when thou hast had enow of that game I have a word for ye; ay, and something more than a word."

Judith withdrew from my embrace, and, oh! but her face was rosy as the dawn. She took my hand in her right, and her grand-dad's in her left, and so joined us.

"'Tis well," said the old man. "Now, Will, heed."

His eyes pierced into mine, and once again the room darkened to my vision, once again

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when I saw the vision was not that about me. For I saw a poor room, dark, with one rush-light flickering on a rough pallet. On it lay Ben, awake and muttering.

"Good Master Will will see to it," I heard him murmur. "He knows me for an honest man who have ever served him and his faithfully, God bless him! He'll never see a poor fellow who loves him put upon."

And with that I was in the wizard's room again, and my heart was light as spindrift and as gay as a robin in May time.

"Hast learnt thy lesson, lad?" said the old man. "Do now that which thou hast in mind to do. Then return hither, and I shall have another word to say to thee. As for this foolish girl, well, youth must to youth. But remember this. As thou treatest her so wilt thou fare. Ill fall on the hand or heart that can bring harm or sorrow on the wizard's grand-daughter. Now, Will, begone. For thy sake I'll do no hurt to Tom till thou comest hither again. For thine own sake, and for Judith's here, have a care of Sir Hubert. Much I know, much can I learn by my art. But

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not all. I know there is yet store of danger for both of you, ay, and for all of us here; but, by God's help and the honesty of purpose which hath been born in thee this night, we may prevail."

I bade the old man good-night, without venturing to ask him the meaning of his courtly raiment or of his magic. I had held my love in my arms. That sufficed for all explanation.

She came out with me into the night, and once again, beneath the glittering of the stars, I held her to me.

"Lass," said I, "hast not yet told me thou lovest me."

"Dost ask me now?" she whispered.

"Ay," said I; "a lover's ears are greedy of words of love."

"Then, Will, I love thee with all my heart and soul," she cried. "Hadst thou not proved thyself worthy to-night my heart had broke. But, Will, dear Will, now thou knowest that love is more than brass, that honour is above gold. Oh, Will, indeed, indeed I love thee, and have loved thee from the first."

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"Dear heart," I cried. "Then what care I for wealth? Work and love will make a heaven of my poor home. Ah! Judith, wilt be content with a poor struggling farmer?"

"Ay," said she; "for it will be thee."

I kissed her again and again, and she returned my kisses with frank abandonment.

Then she withdrew from my embrace and bade me farewell.

Once more I kissed her, and at that she ran laughing within doors. I stayed an instant and looked after her, with my heart aflame. Then I turned to go. As I did so, Fred came gliding from behind the cottage.

"I'll go with ye, master," said he. "Little missy bade me not let you cross common alone to-night."

I know not what he had heard or seen of my love and me, nor cared I greatly. For all the world might know my love, smuggler's lass though she might be. But there was some mystery about her and her grand-dad I had not as yet fathomed,

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At the moment I recked not of it, and I bade Fred fall in alongside, and was glad to have his company.

"When you are wed to little missy," said Fred, "will ye give me work about your farm or house? I can keep your game and kill and trap your fowl, as ye know. And I would not part again with either you or her."

I promised him that he should have his will, and then we went on in silence.

But before I got across the common a great wonder came upon me. How did the old man know that the money bags were hid by me. Had Fred told him?

"Fred," said I, "didst say aught to the chief or Miss Judith of the money bags we counted—those I took from the highwayman?"

"Nay, master," he answered; "'twas none of the gang's business. I said no word."

How then had they known? Well, it mattered not. I felt that I had chosen the right, and, though I had been somewhat hasty in my wooing, seeing that I

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was, so to speak, the Squire of Fritton and Judith but a smuggler's lass (at least, so far as I could tell, though she and her grand-dad were mysteries to me), yet my love was strong enow to make me forget all but that I had won the woman I desired more than aught else on earth.

But how to keep my word without bringing trouble on my head?

I could not openly go to the Mayor of Yarmouth with the brass in my hand. It must appear to come from Ben. Ah! I had it! Ben must give information of another hiding-place where it might be found.

When we got to the farm I bade Fred fetch spade and wait for me in the yard. I stole upstairs as silent as I could and fetched the bags of brass, which I then wrapped in a piece of sailcloth. Fred was waiting for me in the yard when I went out, bearing the weight of gold. I took him with me to where Ben's cottage stood, and we slipped to the back where the cabbage patch was glittering in the starlight, with the leaves crisp with rime. Quietly Fred

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turned up a two-spit depth of mould. Quietly I laid the sail cloth and its contents in the hole. Then the little grave was covered in again, and the plants which had been disturbed set over and their roots pressed down

I swore Fred to silence, and with that we sought our sleep, which I for one felt the need of.

Next morning I rode over to Yarmouth, and with little difficulty obtained the leave of Hal Cordry for a private talk with Ben.

"If he has the money," said I, "and I think he must have it, I'll persuade him to tell its hiding-place. May I tell him at the same time that when it is recovered (if it is found) he will be at liberty?"

"Yes," said the worthy mayor. "There'll be no one to object to his release if once the money is restored. He was not the thief, and none of us of Yarmouth commission will object to playing an honest card against Sir Hubert. The man's arrogance is beyond all reason, and he'll find no countenance in our free city."

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I thanked good Hal and went to seek my man.

'Twas the Saturday before Christmas, the busiest market day of the year. But I put off the jolly greetings and the calls for drink, for my mind would not be easy till Ben was free.

At first he could not understand. Nor did I mean him to have complete comprehension. But I played upon his trust, so that he promised to stay by whatever I said. I then told him I should state that he had confessed that the money was hidden beneath the box which held the watches, and, said I, "I'll see that it is there. I will not let so good a servant languish in jail if I can help it."

Perchance I played the benefactor somewhat unduly. But if I freed him at the cost of the brass I saw no reason why I was called upon to tell him how the brass came where it was.

Before noon the mayor had despatched one of his men with me to ride to Fritton, and, in poor Ben's cabbage patch we found the bags of money, where I myself had laid

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them. We rode back into Yarmouth, where good Hal Cordry had summoned every farmer whom the night rider had despoiled. All the country round must needs go to Yarmouth on the last market before Christmas, and every man Jack of the highwayman's victims was speedily discovered in the market place or at the "Old Black Bull." The jolly fellows were all well enough content that Ben should go free on restoration of their brass. Nay, they even clubbed together and made up a purse for him; for, said they, without him 'twas odds but they'd never have seen a farthing of their money again. The mayor came with me to the place of his confinement, and gave him his liberty, and with it, the farmers' tribute. There were some few pounds over and above all claims, and these the mayor also handed over to Ben. Glad as I was, it irked me to see that I had surrendered more brass than was needful! But how was I to know that the night rider had cash in his pockets other than that which he had taken that night, or how much? Altogether, the matter was a hard one for me; yet I could not grudge

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Ben his good luck. The poor fellow was so grateful, he blessed me again and again, and swore that he would die for me, as I readily believe he would. As soon as he was free he started off for Fritton and his wife and little ones; he stayed not for the sport of the Christmas jollifications, and, though every one of the farmers who had got their money back through him wanted to treat him, when they learnt that he had been released, they could not find him, for he was already trudging the six miles to Fritton. So they must needs be content with what they had given him, and swallow the drink themselves, which there were few loth to do.

I, too, for the first time in my recollection, stayed not to merry make with the jolly fellows, who cried out hearty greetings as I rode through the town. Till nigh on midnight there would be feasting and wassail in the old town, and the roads would be thick with men in liquor till dawn, ay, and till ring of church bells.

But I was in no mood for the stir and singing, the chaffering, the quaffing, the

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jovial greetings and cheer of that day of days in the old town. I hied me homewards, and, as I rode, I thought of the lost brass with some bitterness. For, after all, brass is brass, and a rare good thing to have about the house. I regretted, too, that I had not thought to make enquiry as to Sir Hubert and his cousin's body, the coroner's quest, and aught else which might concern me through mine enemy; but now that I was started homewards I would not turn my horse's head. The money was gone, but there was Judith left; and I had made my choice. But my pouch was light and empty, and I had no longer the wherewithal to fill it.

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CHAPTER XXII.

JUDITH IS CARRIED OFF.

AY! I had made my choice, and emptied my pockets at the call of love; sure, now, I should win my reward without delay. So much, at any rate, was due to me. Soft thoughts of happiness swelled in my heart as old Faithful bore me along the road he knew so well—of happiness and the comfort of a wife at my hearth, of little ones who should keep the old farm as I had striven to keep it, and would still strive, if fortune would but grant me some respite from the crisis which my folly and the infernal fall of the dice had brought on me.

I rode so deep in musing that I scarce noted the change in the sky, ere thick flakes were falling round me. The long-threatened snow had come at last. Well, snow and

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frost are as good for the land as a ton of cow litter to the acre. I had no cause to grumble at the weather. Perhaps it was the loss of that brass, for, in spite of my thoughts of approaching joy, there was a heaviness upon me, a dread of imminent evil, which comes to some of us when grief hovers in the air, waiting to swoop down and overwhelm our frailty with the knowledge of its dismal presence.

So fast fell the swirling flakes that I did not see the man till he was right upon me—the man who was running with great strides to meet my home coming. 'Twas Soft Fred, and when he stayed at my stirrup leathers with a gasp, I needed not his words to tell me some dreadful mischance had happed.

"Master! master!" he cried, panting. "Miss Judith! Miss Judith!"

"Good God, man!" I cried, "speak up; What of Miss Judith?"

"He've stolen her! the villain! Our men are all a holiday making in Yarmouth to-day, and there was none to guard her goings, and he came over the common with his cursed hirelings and took her as she sought

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for herbs beneath the gorse. Ay! took her in full light of day. Poor missy had wandered nigh the confines of his land, towards Burgh, and he came upon her suddenly where no one saw him but Tom Catchpole, who was spying from between the bars of the window in the upper chamber where he lies confined."

"But her grand-dad?" I cried. "Could his art do naught to save her? Could he not foresee and thwart her danger? Oh God! of what avail is all this mystery of magic if he could not do so much? But what has been done as yet, Fred? Has naught been attempted towards her rescue?"

"The old master is nigh crazy," said Fred. "He hath sent his secret and mysterious messengers to his men, but for fear lest in their frolic the rogues should not heed them (and I tell ye, master, there's more than one who have no love for this traffic with the ancient art, be it white or black), I am hasting to summon them by plain word of mouth."

I leapt from my horse, and bade Fred mount and speed on his mission, while I

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hastened home and got astride the blood colt to ride to the Mound. After the old man's powerlessness to save his granddaughter, I had little faith in those mystic messengers of his. Truly it ever needed some present evidence of his strange art to keep it credible and reasonable in my thoughts. What I had seen and heard should doubtless have proved sufficient to convince me, but there was the one fact before me; with all his second sight, his hob o' lanterns, his magic, he had been unable to save my Judith from the hands of the spoiler.

I ran to the farm as swift as the slip of the snow would let me, and waiting but to seize a meat pasty from the larder, I saddled the colt and was off again ere Mother Durrant could ease her soul of the words which thronged quicker to her lips than she could speak them.

There was no let in the snowfall, and twice or thrice as the colt blundered over the bridle path across the common I longed for old Faithful's sure steps. But blunder as he might, I kept the nag at his best speed, and, long as it seemed to my anxiety, it

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was but a brief space of time ere I was at the cottage door, beating upon it furiously.

I heard no answer to my knocking but a dull moaning from within; but, as I flung the door open Tom Catchpole cried out from somewhere above, "In with ye, master. Th' old man is all but shanny" (mad), "and there's not another soul but him and me left about the place."

I was already in when the words reached me, and I made my way to the room which I knew was the wizard's resort.

As if by the mockery of fate he still wore his gallant raiment, but he was huddled up over the fire, moaning and mumbling, his lips drawn back and showing his teeth, his face a dull leaden hue, his eyes lifeless, as though he saw naught. I ran to him and touched his shoulder.

"How long has she been taken, sir?" I cried. "For God's sake rouse yourself and give me what assistance you can."

I saw the light come slowly back to his eyes, his cheeks lost their greyness, and resumed their wonted livid white. He ceased to moan and mumble, and it seemed to me

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as though his frame filled out into the shape of a man from the bag of bones which had cowered over the fire on my first entry.

He rose and stood before me, his lips twitching.

"As God lives," he cried, "such a vengeance shall fall upon that man as shall strike terror into evil doers round about for ages. Will! Will! what can I say to thee? I, to let my girl be carried off! I! with my powers and my prudence! Curse me if you will! but oh! save her from the toils of the evil liver."

"So help me, God, I will!" I cried. "Fred has ta'en my horse to speed him to your men; and if there is strength in my arm I'll have her safe ere harm befall her, if I have to burn the Manor House for her."

"You should have brought him back with you," whimpered the old man. "My messengers which go unseen are sure enow. God! I saw there was trouble coming, but my old eyes were dim to the nature of it!"

"See here, sir," said I, "this is not time for private angers. Tom Catchpole loved your grand-daughter well, give me leave to

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set him free. We can be scouting for the villain's track while the rest are returning."

"Track!" moaned the old fellow. "What track can there be with yonder snowfall? Not a print of hoof or boot will be visible on turf or plough; but as for Tom, do even as ye will."

I ran upstairs and called to Tom, who answered me from beneath the roof. I searched for a door, and found one strongly clamped with iron, a strong room where they might confine a prisoner securely. But the key was in the lock and I turned it, and held out my hand to Tom, who ran to meet me.

"Tom," said I, "you'll help us to save her. Let all our quarrel be forgot till we have won her back; then, if ye will, I'll fight ye man to man."

"Nay, master," said Tom, "I no longer bear ye ill will. I have to ask your pardon——"

"Oh, 'tis yours," I cried. "D——n all palaver, apart from what may help us to her. Tell me, 'twas you who saw them seize her, how was it? How long since? God! that she should have ventured alone on the

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confines of his land after what happed when he came here."

"'Tis scarce an hour since," said Tom; "I was following her with my eyes as she went amidst the gorse, and watched her stoop to gather her simples. She was all but out of sight when I saw Sir Hubert and two others leap over the hedge which bounds his land from the common. She started up, I could see, and thrust her hands out against the sight of him, but he leapt to ground and seized her, and in a moment he swung her on to his horse's withers, and leapt up behind her. And they were off again—back to that devil's house they came from. Even as they fled the snow began to fall; and whether they took her to Burgh or to some other secret place 'twill be hard to find."

"That shall be our work, Tom," said I. "The snow is not yet above six inches deep. If ye can take me to the place where they seized her we should be able to track the horses."

"Ay," said he, "but how far? We know they started to ride towards Burgh, but I doubt they turned off to the hovel on the

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marsh, or to the shooting hut. Sure he'd never take her to the Manor House, where he would think we should first seek her."

"Nay," I cried, "he may very well have taken her there. He would reason that we should doubt his bringing her to his own home, and that the most likely place would seem to us the least likely. But come, Tom, let us go below; sure the old man, who can see so much and make others see so much, should not be at a loss to know her whereabouts."

"But how did ye let Fred know?" I continued, "or the old man?"

"Almost as soon as they were gone," said Tom, "Fred came over the common, and I holloa'd to him. He told the old man, and then went off after you and the rest of us. 'Twill mean a brave fight," said he, licking his lips and smiling. "God send we win, and in time."

I took Tom into the old man's chamber and told him what was in our minds to do. But he stayed us. "Nay," said he, "though I was struck helpless by the tidings I have

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not lost my craft. Wait ye silent, you shall see where they have carried her."

He sank upon the settle in the ingle nook, and again the dull lifeless film covered his eyes. It was as though he were looking inwards, and he scarce breathed, so that he appeared like a dead man hunched up against the chimney wall. Presently he spoke in the strange hollow croak I had heard and wondered at. "Give me your hand, Will," he wheezed; "the light is here, and may be shown to you."

"I don't half like this here game," whispered Tom; "that's too like devil trade for me. I mind old Mother Blunderfield, the witch, who used to go off into fits like that, and all the world knows as she was turned into a black cat, as went up the chimney and never came down again."

But I bade him hold his peace, and took the old man's hand as bidden.

This time I watched my sight, and found that insensibly I closed my eyes. The darkness fell, but opened out again, and I saw a richly-furnished chamber, with great mullioned windows, through which the Burgh

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marsh and a strip of the old castle were visible. Judith was in the room alone, her cloud of sombre hair loose down her back, and ever she paced backwards and forwards, clutching at her locks, and ever her lips murmured in some appeal which was inaudible to me. Through the window I could see the boughs of a willow of strange shape, and I knew the reach of the flats which shone like steel beyond the marsh. Even as I saw the vision I thought it strange that the sight from the window should be clear of snow, for though there was a lay upon the marsh and willow boughs, the air was bright and unfilmed by downfall. But when the vision passed and I saw with natural sight again, the snow had ceased without, and a bright, cold winter sun was blinding on the sheet of dazzling white. Somehow, the fact that I had first seen the sky clear in my vision, and then found it clear on my awaking, gave me confidence that I had indeed been shown the very chamber in which my darling was imprisoned. And I joyed to think I knew what quarter of the house she was in, for I recollected the view from the window,

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and even the quaint shaped willow. The height of the boughs which I saw would establish the position of her room. Our work would be to win to it, and that ere the ruffian had wrought upon her the ill which had befallen many a fair maiden of the country-side within those shame-haunted walls of the De Burghs.

While I was scheming a way to attack the stronghold of the old Manor House, the old man woke to life again.

"Ye saw what I saw," he said to me; "and if ye know not the chamber, I can describe its place. But, lads! lads! 'twill be a bloody business."

"Ay," said I, "but the blood will be upon the villain's head."

"A bloody business, and no easy one," said the old man. "But I can aid ye more than you may think. Ay, I can aid ye to the discomfiture of the evil man."

Even as he spoke Tom cried out that the others were coming over the common. I went to the door and hailed them. Racing, leaping through the snow they came, a score of gallant men of marsh and water, their

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footsteps shaking the land with their momentum so that the snow fell from the gorse, and laid bare the raw black spines atop of the bushes. Every face set with determination, every fist clenched with lust of vengeance. And, behind them, cheering them on, rode Fred on old Faithful. The wizard's messengers had not failed him, or they could never have reached the Mound so soon.

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CHAPTER XXIII.

PREPARING FOR THE ATTACK.

THE air steamed with their breath as they clustered round me, clamouring to be led to Burgh without delay. But ere the last man had gripped my hand the wizard himself came behind me, where I stood at the threshold, and bade his men enter quietly as might be.

Fred leapt from Faithful, and stabled the good old horse at the back of the cottage ere he returned to me, who awaited him at the door.

"I met 'em all a coming back as if the fiend was arter 'em," he cried. "The old man's call reached 'em safe enow; and though they were all over the town, not one but heard the summons of the seven raps, some on a shop window, some on a

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market stall, and some even on their very caps. How he do it passes me; but he done it all right enow this time."

Fred was going on to talk further of the mystery, when the wizard's voice summoned us within.

The old man seemed wonderfully strengthened by the call to action. There was a colour in his cheeks, and he bore himself upright and strode about his chamber with the energy of youth.

"Will," said he, "and all my good lads, first let me tell ye that Master Buddery has, with my permission, set Tom, here, free. The lad has learnt his lesson, and has sworn to be true mate to death. You all know how he regards your young mistress, and there is no fear lest he should act the Judas again. Now, were ye seen by any man of De Burgh as ye came home? You can't be sure, of course; I but ask ye so far as ye know."

"Never a man," cried Fred. "The snow lay untrodden from its last fall when the sky cleared, and not a body was on foot or on wheels. All those wending to Yarmouth were there in the morn."

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"So far, 'tis well," said the chief. "Now, before we decide our actions, I would have ye eat and drink well. There will be work to do, and ye must not go about it with empty stomachs. Take Tom with ye, and treat him as a true comrade. Then, when ye have well eaten and drunken, send Fred to me that I may give you further orders."

The men filed out, in the silent obedience with which they were ever ready, and left me alone with the old man.

"See here, Will," said he, "I must again use my art, for we know not if delay will be safe for my poor girl. If we may, 'twill be best to stay all action till dark, but we must know what the devil is about, and for that some ritual is necessary beyond the mere holding of hands and putting forth strength of will. Draw the clothes across the window —the room must be darkened."

I obeyed him, though half in contempt at what my lack of understanding still regarded as jugglery rather than as a solemn preparation for seeking the aid of helpful agents.

The fire still flung a ruddy glow in the room, and I saw that the wizard held in

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his hand the stilet which I had taken from Sir Hubert. With the point of this he drew strange and, to my sight, meaningless figures on a litter of ash which he had lifted from the hearth and strewn on the table.

When he had satisfied himself with a web of curves and angles, with letters and numbers placed in spaces between the lines, he held the stilet, point downwards, over the centre of this geometrical medley.

I looked at his face, and saw that his eyes were now closed. For a few seconds he stood, breathing so lightly, or so holding his breath for some unintelligible reason, that I could not see the slightest movement of his chest. Then his eyes opened again, and now there was the film over them which I have so often previously described.

His voice, too, had fallen to the weird wheezing croak which seemed to be associated of necessity with this practice of his art. In spite of myself I felt an awe creep over me, and when he called to me to approach I obeyed him with a cowardly reluctance.

"Place yon settle behind me, Will," he

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whispered; "and, when ye see my knees fail me, ease me down upon it. I would not fall, and I cannot impart the vision I seek to you."

I drew the settle and placed it as he wished. I was torn with a chill instinct of dread, and with a feeling of contempt at such mummery. Between the two, I scarce knew what to anticipate.

The wizard raised his face towards the roof. Then he hissed rather than spoke—

"Potent spirits who alone
Lift the veil of the unknown!
Mighty powers who reveal
More than mortal senses feel!
Hear your servant's supplication,
While he weaves the mystic spell."

At this point the old man drew the point of the stilet over the lines he had made in the ashes before him, and he kept still tracing and tracing during the rest of his rhyming.

"Hearken to the incantation
Pleading for the preservation
Of a maid who serves ye well.
By the mysteries of old,
Show the place, the mind, the plan,
Show the secrets of the man,
Master of the thing I hold."

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As his voice fell to the last words, I saw his knees tremble and bend, and, starting forward, I took him in my arms and lowered him gently to the settle.

He lay back, his head thrown sideways, limp and nerveless as a dead man.

Presently his lips moved, and I bent down to catch his words.

"He is in the great hall at the Manor House," came the faint sentences. "He curses because she has resisted him. There are not more than half a score of his men there. He complains that the rest have gone to Yarmouth. He curses Forbes, the revenue officer, for refusing to help in seizing Judith, and retiring his men. But he has no fear of us; he does not know our strength. Now he curses Will, and lays on him the blame that his cousin's trade became known. He cries out for vengeance on the slayer of his cousin, for he has seen the marks of blows other than of a fall. But he knows not that 'twas Will who killed him."

"Damnation!" I cried to myself. "How on earth does this old man know that?"

But the low husky words flowed on, and

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I stayed my astonishment to listen. All contempt had left me now; I was in thrall to the eerie wonder of the thing. I doubted not that the old man saw what he described. Ay, and heard the words and knew the thoughts of the man whose stilet he kept close clutched.

"He cries out against the coroner's jury. They have held the death to be accidental, and added that it was a providential thing that the night rider had met with his deserts. Now he thinks again of Judith. Although he fears us not, he thinks that Will may make attempt to win within the Manor House. He asks if the draw-bridge is up? as he hath ordered."

"Begad!" I muttered, "I had forgot that same draw-bridge." And, indeed, though I knew well enough that the Manor House was moated, I did not know, nor do I think it was common knowledge, that the draw-bridge was ever used, or could be.

"Now," continued the old man, "a woman has come to him, and he bids her go to Judith with food and wine. "Tell the girl," says he, "to resign herself to what must be,

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and to prepare to receive me before midnight."

The husky voice ceased. The old man sat silent and motionless for a space; then, with a gasp, his neck gathered strength to sustain the weight of his head. He sat upright, and his eyes opened."

"Heard you all?" he asked, and when I had answered him in the affirmative, he smiled and said, "We need not venture till dark has shut down, but we must needs prepare for the attack. Let in the light again, lad. We can do no more ere eventide."

I had drawn back the coverings over the window, and was returning to the old man's side when Fred came in to say that the men had refreshed themselves, and awaited orders.

"Bid them come hither," said the wizard.

Presently they all came trooping in.

"Fred," said the old man, "you are as shrewd a marshman as any. Tell me, then, how would you go about crossing the moat at the Manor House if the drawbridge chance to be up?"

"Why, master!" cried Fred, "I've never

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known it up. I doubt but it's too stiff for raising."

"Nay," said the old man, "'twill be up, I can tell you that much. You must contrive some means of crossing the moat."

"D——e, we'll swim across," cried old Bill Prettyman.

"'Twill not afford ye hold upon the further side," said the wizard. "Ah, Fred, I see ye have devised somewhat."

"Ay, master," said Fred. "Can I have the masts o' the dingheys?"

"If needs be," said the old man. "Now see to what ye want, and provide stout cudgels for all the party. I'll not have steel used, nor barkers, for an we make a battle of it, 'twill bring the whole country down on us, and let them know our strength."

"Ay, ay, sir," said Bill.

"Then off with ye," said the old fellow. "Be ready to start at six o'clock; 'twill be dark enow by then, but for the blink o' the snow."

They went off muttering, and, I think, complaining because they could not make a dash then and there.

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"Now, Will," said the wizard, "you and I must e'en refresh ourselves."

He brought food and drink out of a cupboard in the room, and I produced my meat pasty which I had brought from the farm. This, with a draught or two of the cordial, made me fit for anything. The time seemed long ere the dusk closed down, and the men began to stamp and shuffle outside the cottage in their eagerness to be about the venture.

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CHAPTER XXIV.

THE ADVANCE AND ATTACK.

LUCK was with us, for hardly had the darkness fallen, and a glimmer of starlight began to show on the white spread of the land, when the snow fell again, and heavier than before—a superb screen for our approach. The old man called us all together, and placed me in charge of the expedition. Soft Fred was chuckling over what he had made of the dinghey masts. At the foot of each a stout board, some two foot square, had been nailed. The block and cordage at the head had been removed, and the two masts lay in the snow, transformed into two mighty leaping poles. With the ordinary pole, eight or nine feet long, the marshmen can spring across an eighteen foot dyke. With these vast instruments I had little doubt but they

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would be able to negotiate the moat. I was glad to remember that from my youth I had practised myself in the use of these poles. My doubt of their efficacy was that no one man could run and leap with them. But Fred told me that he intended two to run and leap together, and in this way I thought they could be used with profit.

The snow fell so thick when we started that we could scarce see a foot in front of our noses. But Fred knew every inch of the way, and we had decided to make for Burgh Staithe in the boats, and to advance to the attack from the marshes below the Manor House.

The six-oared gig held a dozen of us, and the rest easily got into the two dingheys. We made our way through the blinding snow under the pilotship of Fred, and reached the staithe at Burgh without adventure. Then we disembarked, and formed up for me to describe my plan of attack.

"If the bridge is up," said I, "and you may take it from me that it will be, we must stand together beneath the twin-trunked willow which stands to the nor'-

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west of the house. There we'll reconnoitre and see the most likely place to obtain a vantage on the other side of the moat. Nine of you must try the main entrance over the bridge, eight must try the back. Let Fred guide the former, and Bill Prettyman make for the kitchen. Tom Catchpole will stay with me, and one man must keep by the boats. You can arrange your parties as you please. Now no cheering," for I saw their mouths begin to open and their hands to fly to their caps, and dreaded the result of a sturdy marshland cheer, though the snow still deadened all sound.

Tom Catchpole came close to me and said, "I thank ye, master; but, as ye know, my life is forfeit, I'll spend it in sending a devil from hell back to whence he came, if I get the chance of it."

"Nay, nay, Tom," said I, "be not too reckless. Let the law look after itself. 'Twas but a gauger you killed, and he would have done the same for you."

But he only muttered something, I think that he knew his time was come, and then fell in behind me.

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"Come on, lads," I cried. "Let Fred lead the way. By pike and eel, I can't see the river wall."

It did my heart good to hear how the men made their cudgels whistle round their heads before they fell in line and marched at a quick step behind their guide. Two parties of four each carried the masts upon their shoulders, and Fred had his usual long pole trailing behind him like a tail.

With never an error he led us to the rise of ground on which the Manor House was placed and to the twin willow, the boughs of which I had noted in my vision of Judith.

"Look," said Fred, pointing upwards. "The old master has not forgot us."

I gazed upwards, and there, against the window of the room which I believed to be that in which I had seen Judith, a round ball of light quivered and danced.

"How he get them hob o' lanterns to do his bidding get over me," said Fred. "That's where she is, you may depend on't."

For the first time in my life I saw the moat with observant eyes. Often as I had

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been at the Manor House before I had not troubled to take any note of the gloomy ditch which surrounded the house. The bridge had never been raised in the present baronet's time, though there was many a story about his father's cruelties and shameful licence which had constrained him to guard himself from the village folk by means of the protection of the moat.

'Twas not more than twenty feet in width. How deep was it ?

Fred sounded it with the end of his leaping pole. A bare six feet in depth, and a harder bottom than might have been expected.

We crept round the house, for opposite where we first stood the walls of the manor ran sheer into the moat, and there was no projection on which a man might stay his foot after the leap across the width. But beneath the bridge, or rather somewhat to one side of it, the ground shelved up. Fred knew of this, and led the way to the spot exactly opposite. If once a crossing could be effected at any spot, the rest would be easy, for a terrace ran round the house level with the bridge above, and the masts

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would serve as ladders to these active fellows.

Now my intention was this. The twin willow raised stout boughs to within six feet of Judith's window. I meant to leap from the tree upon her lattice and break in, while the others attacked the house as best they could. Tom was to follow me if necessary.

"Come on," said Fred, "let's get across."

Again I had to check the inclination to cheer. Though we had the superiority in numbers, the enemy were behind stout walls, and if they discovered us before we had broke in the fight might very well go wrong.

Bill Prettyman and another man of about his size caught hold of one of the great mast leaping poles, about half way up. They poised it, the wooden mudboard in front, and carrying it as if it were a battering ram, they ran towards the moat at full speed. The snow had lessened somewhat by this time, and there was light enough to see the break of the land against the moat.

When Bill and his mate got to the edge

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of the moat, without checking their momentum they thrust the pole down into the bed, where the mudboard stood firm on the ooze. Over they flew, heels in air, one on one side of the pole, the other on the other. They turned as the pole swung over the vertical and ran their grasp upwards and descended on the other side. Then, as one man, they dropped together beneath the Manor House walls. 'Twas bravely done. They seized the top of the mast pole, and, with a vigorous thrust, sent it back to be caught by the next pair to venture over. Another couple had by now got across by means of the other mast, and the fun grew fast and furious, one couple or another always seeming to be in mid-flight. Not a misadventure was there, for, though the least error in judgment might have stayed the passage of the mast in mid-flight and dropped those upon it ignominiously in the water, they were all too good marshmen, and all too much on their mettle, to be careless. Fred went across last with his own pole, with which he was extraordinarily expert.

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When I saw that all were over I climbed the tree, Tom after me.

I watched the men across the moat prop the masts against the bridge overhead and swarm up, one after another, till all had made good their footing on the upper terrace. Fred and his eight took their stand against the main portal, raising the mast with them; Bill and his party took the remaining mast round to the back.

I was opposite the chamber before which the curious light still glowed, and, to speak truth, I did not care for the task of leaping through that light from where I clung. I could see a light within shining through the chink of a curtain, and knew, with gratitude, that no shutters barred my entrance.

I gave Bill two or three minutes to get into position, and then blew my whistle.

A yell burst from the throat of every man of the attacking party as they dashed the masts against the doors which opposed them, now using them as battering rams in good earnest.

Crash went the door by the bridge, and

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I heard screams and cries from within as the men poured through into the hall. Then I breathed a prayer, swung the bough on which I clung as close to the window as I could, and leapt, feet foremost, through the crashing glass, taking lead and glass tinkling in with me. The hob o' lantern disappeared.

I dashed the curtains aside, and, with a cry, Judith ran to my arms and clung to me as I clasped her close to my bosom. Blood was pouring from me where the glass had cut me. But Judith, my brave girl, recked not of it but to ask it I were hurt. The cuts were but skin deep.

Even while I held her to me Tom came through the window, as clean as a pigeon flies into its locker-hole.

"Thank God, missy!" he cried.

I had no mind to chide him, though he had leapt before his orders. "Quick," I cried; "we may manage without bloodshed after all."

I had carried a line across with me, which was made fast to the willow, and I soon had Judith in a bowline knot and lowered

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her out. The other end being tied to the tree she swung over the moat with ease. I followed, and found her safe beneath the willow, waiting for me. Tom was about to come, when, from where I stood, I saw another shadow come upon him and heard Sir Hubert's voice shout, "You bloody murderer! Here to me, men. This way. You shall swing, as sure as death."

What to do I knew not. I wished to call off my other men and to make the best of our way back, now that we had accomplished our main object. But to do so would be to leave assistance to go to Sir Hubert, so that Tom might indeed be taken. And in that event there would be only one end for him. So I held my breath; let the others storm about the hall. They would do no man harm unless he merited it.

I saw Tom fling his arms round Sir Hubert, so that the other could not use his steel, which he had flashed in the attack. Neither Tom nor I had carried our cudgels across, so that he was unarmed against a desperate foe.

I kissed Judith, who was again clinging to me.

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"I must go back, dear," said I. "I can't let Tom be taken."

"Ah, no, no!" she cried, in momentary selfishness. But the brave girl saw that I was right. "Go then, dear," said she, "and God protect you."

The snow had now quite ceased, and I could watch the fight going on above in the room from which I had just saved my darling as plainly as if I were still within it. 'Twas true that I could only see the heads, but the story of the fight was written on the faces of the struggling men.

I began to reclimb my willow, when I saw that Tom had seized the baronet's sword and thrown it from the window. It was now unarmed man to unarmed man, and they fought and strove like two wild beasts. I clambered out on the bough from which I had taken my leap, in fear lest any moment might bring aid to Sir Hubert. But Tom had forced the baronet's head backwards to the window, and saw me as I prepared to spring.

"Don't ye come, sir," he cried. "I've about mastered him, and you may get in

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my way. Keep ye there and watch the game."

Sir Hubert's hand at his throat stayed his speech, but the smuggler was thrusting the other further and further back over the window ledge, but, at the same time, was being drawn with his enemy.

"Good God!" I cried, "they'll both be over."

Tom freed his throat from Sir Hubert's clutch for an instant. "You'll tell little missy," he cried, gasping, and I knew what the fine fellow meant. Ay! fine fellow. For, if he had killed a gauger, 'twas in self-defence. I had no thought of his treachery to me. 'Twas love, the irresponsible, which had driven him to that.

Further and further came the struggling, writhing bodies. The curtains had been torn down, and the light of the lamp within fell full upon them, flinging them into black silhouette against the brilliant interior.

"D——!" I cried. "I *must* have a go for it!"

But, as the words passed my lips, Tom gave a great shove with his whole body,

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which now lay atop the baronet's, extended across the window ledge. With an awful cry, Sir Hubert shot over, dragging Tom with him. A moment's silence, and a thud, followed by a splash, told me that they had struck the projecting lower walls and dashed into the moat.

I ran to the edge of the water and peered in. But for the circling, spreading ripples there was no motion in the dark ditch. Both men had gone to their last account, had crossed the bar over which no contraband can e'er be run.

Judith's hands were over her eyes and she was weeping now. But it was no time for weeping. "Come, dear," I cried; "we must call off the others."

I whistled loud and long, and, at the shrill, the drawbridge fell with a rattle, and the whole seventeen men came running across, roaring with laughter. Some had flagons of wine, some great pasties, all were rollicking with spoils.

"We've locked 'em all in the cellars," cried Bill Prettyman. "All barring Dick Hornet and the highwayman, whom we left

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as we found 'em. One in choky, t'other in hell. And what of you master? Why, here's little missy." And the good fellows roused the night with such a cheer that, but for the extreme loneliness of the Manor House, I might have feared to rouse the neighbourhood. But there was never a house for a mile. The loneliness which had so oft stood Sir Hubert in good stead to screen the screams of his victims from the world, now recoiled upon him and his villainous household.

"Thank you, my lads," said I. "But cheer no more. We've lost a brave man."

And I told them how Tom had fallen in fight with Sir Hubert, and they bared their heads and made as if to seek the bodies from the moat. But old Bill stayed them. "Nay," said he "let them lay. 'Twere best for each. 'Twill be thought that Sir Hubert strove to make arrest of Tom, and that both perished in the struggle. Let them lay till they be found. As for the other curs, who had not a kick in them, we have put the fear of God into them, so that they'll never dare to tell of what hath happed here this night.

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By God, master, but we're glad to see ye and little missy! Search as we might we could not come upon Sir Hubert, and we feared the worst. Hurray! Hurray! Hurray!" And the whole crowd of them cheered again and again; and from the staithe, where we had left the boats, I heard the solitary watchman raise his pipe in answer.

As we made our way to the boats the snow began to fall again with great drifting flakes. Soon every print of our footsteps would be lost.

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CHAPTER XXV. AND LAST.

JUDITH'S DOWER.

LOOKING back, as by the goodness of God I am able to do, from a prosperous and peaceful old age, it seems to me as if by the death of Sir Hubert was removed that malign influence which had seized upon my life and sped it along at such haphazard speed during that short but strenuous period before Christmas, 1803. With the cloak of the mighty snowfall which fell upon the land, our deeds of violence, whether evil or pardonable, as the reader may deem them, were blotted out. The even passage of the future began during our journey homeward, on the secret ways of the waters, never again to be vexed with the storm and strife which had tried us so severely.

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Our triumphant return to the Bell Mound was subdued by the solemnity of death—of two deaths, so different, and yet so similar. Sad as the loss of gallant Tom must seem, he could perhaps have had no better ending. He was, alas! due to the gibbet, and surely the still depths of the moat were preferable to that.

And now that the thrill and excitement of the days of trial were over, it boots not to dwell at length on the fulfilment of the wizard's prophecy. I claimed my bride, and her weird grand-dad gave her to me with a good grace. And when I pressed for an immediate marriage, neither he nor Judith seriously opposed me, so that the very morning after our fight at Burgh, the village of Fritton was set all agog by the sight of my darling walking through the snow on my arm to the little church beside the Mere. The church where I meant to make her mine, indeed, on Christmas Day. Of course Mother Durrant must needs mob and grumble, but the old dame's bark was ever worse than her bite, and she ended her lamentations by taking me fairly in her arms and

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calling down blessings on me and her, whom even she called my "bonny wench."

I rode over to Gorleston on the Monday and obtained a licence from the surrogate, and dear old Parson Fish gave me a long discourse on the responsibilities of the marriage state before he would promise to enable me to enter into it on the appointed day.

The night of the attack on Burgh kept its secret. The household of Sir Hubert fled from the neighbourhood when, on observing the broken window, they searched beneath in the moat and found the bodies of their master and poor Tom. Dick Hornet made his escape, and there was no one to inquire too closely into what happened under the shadow of the Manor House walls. The Burgh estate went to a distant and worthy branch of the family, and the county thanked God that a villain was gone.

We were wed early on Christmas morning, as it was the wizard's wish that we should return to the Bell Mound ere keeping our marriage feast at the farmhouse.

And, as I had kept the time of the ceremony private, there were none about so

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early on a day of holiday to embarrass us.

The snow was still so deep that I would not let Judith walk, nor was it possible to drive, so I took her back to the Bell Mound, even as I had fetched her, and even as she had first ridden with me, seated on the old horse's crupper. But now her arms were round me, and she was not too independent to lean against me when the good horse stumbled in the snow.

When we got to the cottage the men were about, and greeted us with a great cheer. We had escaped them when we set out for the church, but they were all invited to the feast, and were dressed in their best-knitted vests and navy blue pilot cloth.

I helped my wife down from old Faithful's back, and Soft Fred led him away—Soft Fred who had scoured beneath the snow till he found a sprig of blooming gorse to wear. Then we went within.

The old wizard was even finer than I had seen him before, and with his fine clothing he had put on a dignity of carriage and a courtesy of manner which impressed me.

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"Thou hast a good wife, Will," said he. "Art content to take her dowerless? Art content that thou hast put thy heart before thy pouch?"

"Ay, sir," said I, "and I thank ye for the lesson."

"Then come hither, lad," said he, "and learn what thou hast married."

"Egad, sir," I cried, "I think I can tell you that," and I took my wife fairly in my arms and kissed her.

"Ay," said he, "but come hither, none the less."

He led me through a doorway at the chimney end of the chamber I had grown to know so well, and showed a narrow passage which appeared to lead into the Mound. Along this he went, lighting us with a candle. At the end of the passage was a strong, iron-bound door, and about this there were a number of quaint projections and ingenious machinery, the purpose of which was not clear to me.

"A touch by a stranger's hand," said he, "and death would leap forth. But have

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no fear with me, and mark well how I go about to open this portal."

First he turned one knob, then another, till I grew bewildered, and he laughed to see me. "Nay, lad," said he, "the secret will never be needed again."

The door swung back and disclosed such wealth as I had never dreamed of. Shining guineas, bars of gold, boxes of jewels, and great store of wondrous lace were there. 'Tis Judith's dowry," said he, with a chuckle. "What say'st thou now? Art well repaid for thy kindness to thy man Ben?"

"Sir! sir!" I cried, aghast. "Who are you? What is this?"

"I was Sir Joseph Mallard," said he, "with rich estate in the North Country, till I was fool enough to trust the Stuart in the 1745. I was but a lad then, and I threw in my lot with him, and lost every doit. Indeed, I came nigh to losing my life also, with the d——d Hanoverians hunting me as though I were a badger. But if the Government ruined me then I have recovered my wealth by means of honest contraband,

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and ever since I found harbourage in this quiet spot things have prospered with me. Not one of my old friends and companions are left. Thy father, God bless him, knew my story, and helped me to recruit my men as time and the chances of death and imprisonment, which were common to all, rendered needful. Bill Prettyman is the oldest of my friends now. Ay, lad, and thou art the youngest. But 'tis time I gave up the gallant life. An thou wilt have me, I'll e'en seek a corner in thy home, and perchance thou wilt think that these toys will pay for my lodging. The men know they are disbanded, and will leave these waters for the up-river reaches of the Bure. To-day they will do me their last service, and convey this treasure where thou judgest best."

"What, sir," I cried, "this Judith's dower? Nay, who am I that I should wed an heiress?"

"Thinkest thou these add one farthing to her value, man?" cried he in anger. "Then, God forgive me, thou art scarce worthy of her now."

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"Nay, nay," said I, "I shall never be worthy of her. But God knows I value her no more for these. But what am I, a poor indigent farmer, to wed with one so rich in all things? Oh, sir, sir! I thought to have given, and find I am but the beggar lad to the queen."

But at this my Judith, who had been listening at the end of the passage, ran to me with tender words and sweet caresses, so that the tears which had risen to my eyes remained unshed in the holy joy which came nigh to stifle me.

"There! there!" cried the wizard. "A pair of fools; a pair of fools. Well, well, God grant ye may remain as foolish to the end of your days. But, come, 'twill be no light work to remove these. 'Tis time the men commenced their labour."

Now, though of course I had every confidence in the men, I scarce thought it prudent to place so much treasure in their hands, but I did not say aught of my suspicions. And, as it happed, the honest fellows carried every doit in safety to the farm, hiding the treasure in their sailors' bags, so that our

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procession looked like the home-coming of a gallant crew.

The villagers thronged about us as we passed to the farm, and some groaned that to carry such loads was scarce fitting on a Christmas Day, for even in Fritton, though there was no chapel, there was some of the Dissenting element to be smelt by a keen nose.

And when the treasure had all been safely stored in the secret recess of which I have previously writ, 'twas time to see to my company.

The feast had been prepared in the great barn, and Mother Durrant had surpassed all I could have believed possible. She herself, honest dame, was bright and merry as a girl, and made jests with Ted Fitch, my foreman, and poor Ben, that brought the blushes to my Judith's cheeks. Folks were not so delicate in their ears and mouths then as they have since become, though, for my part, I see no inward improvement even if there is more outward show of modesty.

But the eating, and the drinking, and the toasts, and the speeches (for every man

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seemed to think it his duty to wish me luck; and if Parson Fish was the most learned, Soft Fred was of a surety the most amusing. Being, as he said, about to give over his softness, he made the most of his last chance) and the singing were such as were never heard in the village within the memory of living man.

And when we of the house thought fit to retire, we left the other jolly fellows and wenches singing round a bowl of snap-dragon and dancing the while.

"Christmas come but once a year,
But once a year,
But once a year;
Christmas come but once a year,
We'll crown the Hall with holly.
We'll brew a good tub
Of humming bub,
Of humming bub,
Of humming bub;
We'll brew a good tub
Of humming bub
To drown our melancholy.
Christmas come but once a year,
So let us all be jolly."

And as I left the barn, with my dear wife on my arm, a soft girl's voice whispered in my ear—

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"I wish ye luck, Will. But, oh! my heart aches."

I looked round, and caught the saucy laughing eyes of Nell Catchpole, who seemed mighty taken with the change in Soft Fred.

* * * * *

We had not been wedded more than six weeks, when one night my wife and I woke, and close to our ears, on the bed-post it seemed, came seven raps.

Judith leapt up and struck flint and steel. "Oh, Will," she cried, "it's grand-dad."

We hastened to where the old man lay. He smiled as he saw us enter. "Ah!" he sighed. "You heard the old signal. 'Tis the last. Kiss me, lass—ay, and thou, too, dear Will," for the old man had taken a great liking to me of late, and was eager for my affection and the show of it.

"See," he sighed. And all about the room came balls of flame, dancing and shining bright. Without the window they glimmered innumerable.

Sudden, as we wondered at the sight,

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they all fled, and the room was left in the gloom of the poor light of our candle. Judith flung herself by the bedside and burst into weeping. The old man's powers, of what nature, and whence derived, I know not, were dead, and with them the wizard too had gone.

Now I give my grandson Will fair warning that if he make a mock of this true story of his great-great-grandsire's end, as he is too wont to do of things he cannot comprehend, I will try to knock reverence into him with my staff, and I can promise him that this time his grandmother will not interfere in his favour.

But, after all, it is not the lad's fault so much as that of his puppies and pedants of masters at the Yarmouth Grammar School, who teach their pupils to think they are wiser than their elders. All I know is that what I have set down here is as I saw it, and that though Judith herself hath much skill in the preparation of herbs and roots for lotions, unguents, drinks and cordials (especially these last, of which I am very fond), she never knew by what means her

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grandsire wrought the wonders of which you have read and I have writ.

But the inability to believe in what is uncomprehended is not, thank God, a conceit either of hers or her husband's. And, seeing the froth and impudence of the self-satisfied young folk, I can only regard the more tenderly the dear eyes and dear completeness of my wife, who has shared my heart and hearth so long and so tenderly, and who, I trust to God, will be with me to Eternity. I have done, reader. May you in your time of trouble have such a helpmeet as my good angel bestowed on me, unworthy. Ay, and may you, too, learn, if the lesson is needful, that to put your brass before your heart is to lose all chance of true happiness here; ay, and hereafter.

THE END.

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